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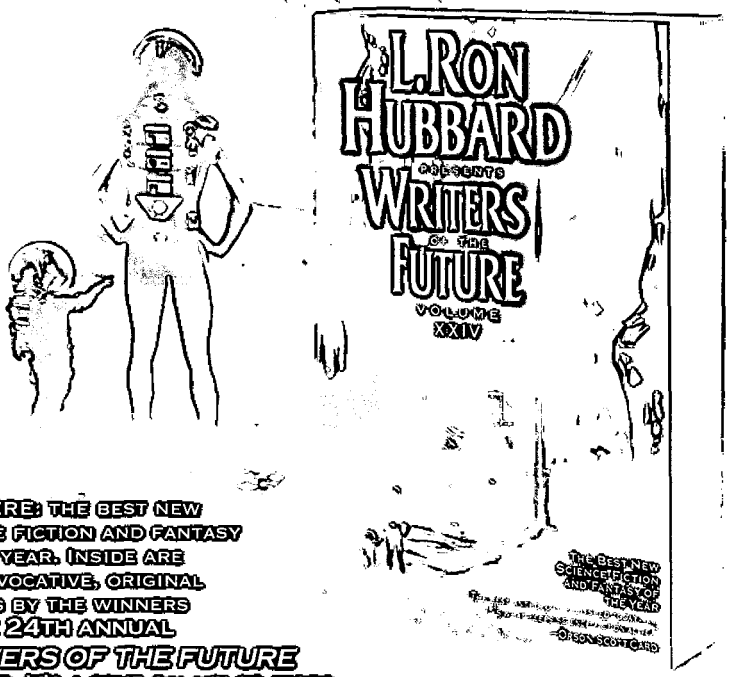

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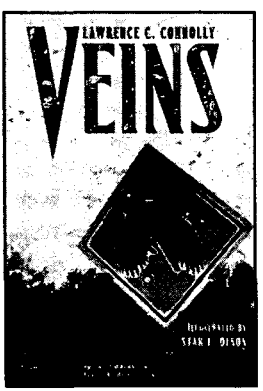

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Seven years ago, Albert Cowdrey showed us one of the weirder sides of New Orleans in "Queen for a Day." That story, which first appeared in our Oct/Nov. 2001 issue and is currently posted on our Website, won the World Fantasy Award.

Three years ago, Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans and changed everything...including the lives of Detectives Fournet and Tobin. Read on and see if those changes are for the better.

By the way, as of this writing, reports suggest that about 500 families displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are still living in FEMA trailers.

Inside Story

By Albert E. Cowdrey

THOUGH AS HE WAS, RETIRED Detective Sergeant Alphonse Fournet admitted that he hadn't been able to handle the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"Living in Alabama for a month," he groused to Chief of Detectives D. J. Tobin. "Wunnerful folks, but how they live! Frying ham in lard. Alla time asking me what choich I belong to. They had a *prayer vigil*, for Chrissake, to apologize to God for pissing him off enough to hit us with Katrina. It's like that guy Cheney shot apologizing for getting in the way of the birdshot."

It was noon at Ya Momma's Bar & Grill, and succulent aromas filled the air. Tobin, who was picking up the tab, listened patiently but sympathized only to a point.

"You didn't lose your house or nothing, right, Alphonse?"

"I live in Algiers," said Fournet, as if that were sufficient explanation for his good fortune. "The west bank is the best bank. You oughta loin that, D. J., now you gotta wife and kids to proteck."

"Maybe I'll think about it. We ain't moving back in the Ninth Ward, I can tell you that. Neighborhood ain't there no more. Traneesha and the

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kids're still in Houston. She's got 'em in school, and — it's funny, you know? In Texas they expect kids to loin something, even in public school. I always figured public school was just a place where you put kids so's they wouldn't run the streets."

He paused for a moment while they both meditated on the alien lands that surrounded them. Then Tobin said, "Okay, we're all caught up. Now let's get down to business."

Fournet held up his right hand, palm flat, like a cop stopping traffic. "Lemme tell you sump'm foist, D. J. It's nice of you to invite me for lunch, but I ain't going back to woik, no matter what."

"What if your city needs you?"

"For what? To help catch some druggies been shooting other druggies? Gimme a break."

"Nah," shrugged D. J. "That's just the self-cleaning oven at woik. Can't say it in public, but the only useful thing those guys do is kill each other off. No, what I'm talking about is real human people disappearing. Like *phht*. We don't need no more of that. Besides twelve hundred and something drowned and otherwise dead, the city lost two hundred thousand live ones moved to elsewhere after the flood. We can't stand to lose no more."

At this point an elderly man attired in a dirty apron and liver spots shuffled up and deposited on the table two frosty Turbodogs and an enormous bowl of crawfish étouffee. Fournet seized a dented spoon and set to work with gusto.

"Don'tcha know those mudbugs are solid cholesterol?" frowned D. J. He was brown-bagging, and sounded envious.

"You wanna live forever, or you wanna live?"

"Traneesha wants me to be there and still breathing when the kids graduate."

"So, your wife's watching you by satellite, or what?"

After brief meditation, D. J. pushed his brown bag away and called out, "Waiter, make it two crawfish."

That afternoon, back home on Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler Drive, Algiers, Fournet discussed D. J.'s proposal with his wife, Alma. "He says people been disappearing out the FEMA trailer parks, and he wants me to check it out."

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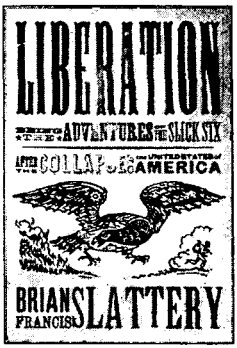

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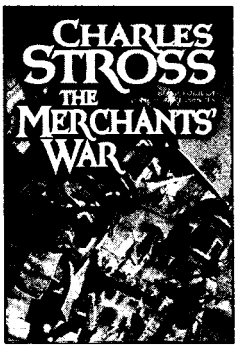

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Alma muted Oprah and thought the proposal over. "Well, normally I'd say trailer trash is trailer trash, and who cares? But today, anybody can be trailer trash. If the Pope lived in Noo Awlyunz, *he* might be trailer trash."

Together they kicked the proposal around. What impressed Alma was D. J.'s comment on the state of the city.

"We gotta get things back on their feet," she decided. "Like it is, we ain't no city no more, we're a goddamn a-toll. Island One, everything's fine. Island Two, everybody's missing. Island Three, no island at all. This can't go on. We need our people back."

"Well, maybe I'll do it. The department's so short-handed, they even got a use for old fat guys like me."

"Right. They want you at Tulane and Broad, and I don't want you around the house supervising me like you been doing. One more piece of good advice outta you, Alphonse, I'ma put Drano in your gumbo. So get your wide butt to woik and do something useful for a change."

This connubial advice settled the matter.

On his first day as a Special Deputy, Fournet received a temporary ID, a badge, and an unmarked police car, and set out to visit a Seventh Ward trailer park housing people made homeless by the storm.

The trailers were all small and white and as alike as ice cubes from the same tray. A rent-a-cop seated on a camp stool by the only gate in an encircling six-foot cyclone fence directed him to the dwelling of Mr. Alvin Joule Palumbo.

The door was answered by an undershirted man of middle age who backed deeper into the trailer and invited the detective to follow him.

"So this is what a FEMA trailer's like," said Fournet, wedging his belly through the door. "It's uh, compact, I guess the woid is."

"F'sure," said Palumbo. "Where else can you sit on the terlet, fry an egg and watch TV, all at the same time?"

"So, you contacted the po-leece about a missing neighbor?"

"Yeah. That was a week ago. What you all been up to in the meantime?"

"Fightin' crime," said Fournet, though without conviction. "Tell me about this neighbor of yours."

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"Her name's Miz Zeringue."

"Zerang," muttered Fournet, hauling out his notebook.

"Spelled Z-E-R-I-N-G-U-E. Don't ask me why."

Fournet wet the tip of a pencil stub on his tongue and inscribed the name. "So she's been missing a week?"

"More like two. I mean, nobody knows each other in this damn place, and if she hadn't been a good neighbor and brought me a bowl of toitle zoop when I had the flu, I wouldn'ta noticed she was gone at all. I went to retoin her bowl (you know how ladies are about their kitchenware) and when she didn't answer the door I put it down on the step and left. But after it sat there for three days, I got worried about her and asked the guard to check out her trailer. When we seen it was empty and her milk was sour, I called the po-leece."

He added darkly, "I think her disappearing had something to do with the thirteenth trailer."

"The what?"

"You happen to count how many trailers are in this row?"

"No. The guard just said, 'End a the row is Mr. Palumbo,' so I never counted."

"Well, there's twelve. Only the night she musta disappeared on, there was thirteen. And don't look at me like I'm nuts, neither. I'm a grown-up man, I don't use dope, I don't drink no more than I have to to get along with my wife and daughter in Jackson and me living in a sardine can trying to oin a living while I sue the goddamn Friendly Neighbor Insurance Company that wants us to take $3,034.59 in settlement of a hundred-thousand-dollar claim."

He paused for breath.

"Anyway, that night I woiked late at Home Depot, and come back about ten o'clock and just automatically stopped at number twelve. And yeah, I noticed there was another trailer beyond it at the end of the row, but I thought, well, today they musta brung in another one. Meanwhile I was trying to open the door, only my key wooden toin the lock. Then this voice inside says, 'Whozat messing round with my door?'

"I said, 'Your door! I live here.' With that the door opens, and it's the black guy lives next door and he's got him a butcher knife in his hand and he says, 'Mr. Palumbo! Whatchoo want this time a night? I thought you

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was a boiglar.' I apologized and went to the last trailer, and that toined out to be mine. So I figured the new trailer must be someplace in the middle of the row, though how they squeezed it in without disconnecting and moving all the others I coulden figure. And next morning when I counted again, there was only twelve trailers just like always. I guess," he added resentfully, "you don't believe me."

But Fournet — recollecting a case he and D. J. had worked, involving a necklace that behaved like a boa constrictor — was better than Palumbo thought at believing the unbelievable. He said slowly, "This Miz Whatsit. She woiks late too?"

Palumbo nodded vigorously. "At Rite-Aid. They lost so many employees she double-shifts lotsa days to make money to pay a lawyer so she can sue *her* insurance company."

"Then if the new trailer was right next to hers, she might of walked into it by mistake?"

"You quick on the uptake," said Palumbo gratefully. "She mighta found the door on the new trailer unlocked and thought, 'Whoa! Did I forget to push the button?' So she stepped inside, and that was when they grabbed her."

"They who?"

"They whoever. You wanna beer?"

"Why not?"

"Well, if you back out the door just a second and gimme some space, I'll get one for you."

In the hours that followed, Fournet visited three more trailer parks where residents had disappeared. The missing included a construction worker named Harry J. Symms, a beignet cook named Mary Margaret Trudeau, and an aspiring rap artist whose real name was Bill Snyder but who called himself Bluddy Slawta.

Harry's roommates were deeply concerned about him, and Mary Margaret's co-workers wanted to offer a $500 reward for her safe return. Bluddy Slawta's neighbors begged Fournet not to return him if he were found, and after listening on an iPod to the artist's latest, "Ho's and Bitches Need to Die," Fournet heartily agreed.

Sunset had arrived with a saffron sky and hysterical traffic was clogging all the main arteries of the city when Fournet, heading home to

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Algiers, heard the opening chords of "Blueberry Hill" erupting from his cell phone. [The cop car's radio had perished during Katrina and had never been replaced.]

Fournet popped the gadget open and glued it to one ear, meantime steering onto an Expressway onramp. "Yeah? *Watch out, Butthead!*"

"What?" The voice was D. J.'s.

"People don't know how to drive no more. I'd like to run that character in. Talking on a goddamn phone while he's driving the freeway."

"So are you."

"Yeah, but I'm doing my duty. What's up?"

"That foist lady on your list. What her name was again?"

"Zerang. Z-E-R-I-N-G-U-E, Zerang."

"Well, she been found. She was wandering around in the flooded area out by Paris Road. I don't mean it's flooded now, but it was flooded bad, and it's still empty except for the wreckage. Some National Guard guys on a routine patrol looking for looters spotted her and brung her in."

"She okay?"

"Yes and no. She's alive, and she wasn't mugged or raped. But she had her clothes on backwards."

"What?"

"Shoit and pants next to her skin, bra and panties on the outside. Her clothes were inside out, too — also her shoes. And she's talking in reverse."

"Whatchoo mean, in reverse?"

"You got a bad connection? By in reverse I mean in reverse. At Judah Touro when they asked her how she was feeling, she said, 'Won doog leef I, doog lear.' Took 'em a while to figure out she was saying, 'I feel good now, real good.' I mean, she wasn't babbling or nothing, she seemed like a nice sensible lady, just politely talking to them, only in reverse."

Fournet sighed. Another screwball case. "She's still at Touro?"

"Yeah. Let her rest tonight, check her out tomorra morning. Okay, Alphonse?"

When Fournet reached home, Alma was tasting a bubbling caldron of red beans and Cajun sausage. Frowning critically, she added a hefty dash of Tabasco and asked, "So where you was at today?"

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"On some of the other islands," he said, and popped his first Turbodog of the evening. After one swallow, he added, "It's wild out there."

THE INTERVIEW took place in a comfortable solarium of Touro Hospital.

Mabel Zeringue turned out to be a plump widow of forty-six with a cap of neat brown hair just starting to gray, and missing contacts that caused her to lean and peer at Fournet as he questioned her. She was wearing clean pajamas and a blue wrapper that Mr. Palumbo had brought her from the trailer park, so that she wouldn't have to be interrogated wearing the paper doily provided by the hospital.

To Fournet's relief, overnight she'd recovered the ability to speak in the usual manner.

"They tell me I was kind of incoherent yesterday," she admitted. "I just don't remember. I do remember those nice Guardsmen picking me up. One of them looked a lot like my Alvin, who's in Eye-rack."

"You gotta boy in the service?"

"No, he's with Boots and Coots. They fix oil wells and pipelines after the insurgents blow them up. They all pretty busy, them."

Fournet forbore to ask whether she meant the insurgents or the repairmen, assuming that — since they made work for each other — both must be active. Instead, he zeroed in on the subject of the interview.

"I hear you was missing from your trailer for a while, Miz Zeringue. You remember anything about that?"

She frowned. "No, I really don't. I remember my trailer was unlocked one night, and that scared me a little. I thought about going back for the guard, but then I thought, 'Oh heck, I been so tired, I bet I just forgot to lock it.' So I went in. And the next thing I remember, I was walking down this blacktop road, feeling kind of, you know, disorientated, and then the National Guard came by. I asked them how I got there, but they didn't seem to understand me."

The interview continued for another fifteen minutes without turning up anything solid. Except for one thing — last night she'd had a bad dream in which somebody named Evert ("You know, like Chris Evert, only he didn't pronounce it right") had been coming to do something that scared her. But she woke up before he got around to it, whatever *it* was.

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"What this Evert looked like?" Fournet inquired.

"I never actually saw him. I just heard this creepy voice say he was coming."

"Creepy voice, huh?"

"Sort of cold and dead. You know, like the voice on the phone that says, 'Your call is *very* important to us.'"

Before exiting the hospital, Fournet spoke to the harried-looking psychiatric resident who'd examined Mrs. Zeringue. He confessed that the case puzzled him.

"I figured she must have had an episode of stress-induced amnesia. Lots of stressed-out people wandering around these days. But she was missing for two weeks, so that explanation washes out. Oh, she's amnesic all right, but the case is totally atypical. Barring a brain injury or tumor that doesn't seem to exist, amnesia shouldn't last that long. I just don't know what happened to her. That business of talking backward — that really got me. Yet her CT scan's normal. In fact, everything's normal, except — "

"Except what?"

"Well, besides talking backward, she kept clearing her throat. An ENT checked, and there was a small amount of bruising inside her trachea, about what you'd get from having an endoscopy."

He explained the term, then hurried off about his business, which seemed to consist of nothing but crises.

At noon Fournet again joined D. J. for lunch at Ya Momma's. To the hovering waiter, who since yesterday had changed his apron but kept his liver spots, he said, "Shrimp po'boy, large size, dressed, with extra mynez."

Having made sure that D. J. would get his money's worth when he paid for the lunch, Fournet took out his notebook and reported everything he'd learned about the missing people, the thirteenth trailer, and so forth. At the conclusion he groused, "I might of known you'd hand me something wacko."

"Ain't nobody better than you, Alphonse, when it comes to wacko cases," D. J. assured him. "So whatchoo gonna do next?"

They discussed the question while downing two Turbodogs each. Then the food arrived. While D. J. nibbled his relatively modest oyster

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loaf, Fournet used Tabasco and ketchup to complete a monster sandwich comprising a halved French loaf, twenty-four large fried shrimp, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and gobs and gobs of extra mayonnaise. Then he devoured it all, down to the last flake of crust.

His meal would have left an anaconda inert for a month. Fournet, on the contrary, felt ideas beginning to percolate the more he ate. *That comes*, he told himself, *from eating brain food*, and he resolved to ask Alma to fry him a half-dozen catfish for dinner. Finally he spoke.

"You asked me what I was gonna do next."

"Yeah. So?"

"Right now, I'm gonna go home and have me a nap. Good food desoives to settle. Then this evening after dinner, I'ma go out and visit trailer parks. One by one them rent-a-cops are gonna walk around with me and count their goddamn trailers, and if they find an extra, I'm gonna walk into it and see what I find."

"Well, you be sure and take your personal Glock."

D. J. specified *personal* because Fournet, as a mere Special Deputy, wasn't authorized an official firearm. D. J. had, however, gotten him a concealed-weapons permit.

"Wouldn't leave home without it," Fournet assured him.

D. J. ordered a last beer for each of them, and when the bottles arrived, raised his and toasted Fournet. "Whenever the young guys at Headquarters ask me where I loined po-leecing, I tell 'em I had me a great partner who taught me everything I know."

Fournet was not embarrassed by the praise. He merely acknowledged the salute by raising his own Turbodog. Facts were, after all, facts.

The first four parks yielded nothing but the glaring tedium of white cubes under vapor lamps. It was in the Seventh Ward, in the same park where Mrs. Zeringue had lived, that a new rent-a-cop — a glum, somewhat toadlike gent named Scramuzza, wearing the uniform and shoulder patch of the Junkyard Dog Protective Service — reluctantly counted his trailers, and came up with one extra.

"Now how the hell that got in here?" he demanded.

Fournet might have said something about fishermen who like to return to spots where they've had a bite before, but instead decided to get

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rid of the guard. Uniform or not, shoulder patch or not, to him the guy was a civilian, and therefore by definition worse than useless if for any reason things got rough.

He said, "Maybe you better get back and watch the gate. We don't need no strangers waltzing in to complicate things."

He watched Scramuzza waddle away, staging a kind of flicker-on, flicker-off departure as he vanished into the ebon shadows of trailers and reappeared in the shafts of cold light between. Then Fournet turned back to the trailer in question. It looked exactly like any other FEMA trailer except, as Scramuzza had pointed out, that it lacked the essential power and water and sewer hookups, and was therefore unfit for human habitation.

He checked and reholstered the Glock under his armpit, climbed the two metal steps to the door, and touched the knob. It turned smoothly, the door opened, and he stepped into — or rather, as he discovered, *through* — a panel of darkness. A sudden flare of intense light forced him to blink, and when his eyes opened —

HE WAS STANDING on an immense plain, sandy and painfully bright, even though no sun was visible. Far off, dust-devils whirled and dispersed, formed again and repeated their dance into oblivion. Like them, Fournet did a slow rotation, finding no trace of the trailer — or anything else — except more dust and sunless light.

Confronted with such a backflip in reality, a man of earlier times would have gone into fits. But Fournet — both a cop and a survivor of the Twentieth Century — had been programmed all his life to expect miracles, especially unpleasant ones. True, his heartbeat rose and his palms felt slick, but he ordered himself to calm down. He thought he knew where he was.

"Now how," he demanded, "did I get to Roswell Frigging New Mexico?"

He was still awaiting an answer to this question when a shining cube emerged from the ground, shedding sand and dust and taking form as a penthouse like the one at the top of an elevator shaft.

Two gleaming metal doors opened, and a small personage stepped out.

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With a bobbing walk that caused him to flounce his gleaming cloak of emerald feathers, he approached Fournet and paused, cocking his head with its two button-bright eyes first to one side, then the other. A flexible extension resembling a beak opened, and a lilting, bubbly voice not unlike the liquid accents of a mockingbird emerged.

"Fear not," piped the creature. "You have entered a civilized realm where it will be your great joy to assist the progress of science. You may call me Mr. Green."

"What else?" muttered Fournet.

So he wasn't in Roswell. He took a deep breath and argued down a moment of rising panic. He told himself that, yeah, being a victim of alien abduction wasn't exactly lunch at Ya Momma's, but it wasn't inconceivable, either. In fact, it was a lot like late-night TV, just better colorized.

This reflection stopped him from shooting Mr. Green — Fournet's usual response to the unexpected — and yet things were sufficiently disturbing to make him slide his fat right hand under his two-button wash 'n' wear jacket, grip his Glock, snap off the strap covering the holster with his thumb, and prepare to open fire at the first sign of trouble.

"Please to step this way, my good sir," the creature was burbling along. "Our building is the most prominent in this great city."

Again Fournet searched the vacant distance, looking for the great city but not finding it. Mr. Green proceeded to clear things up.

"It extends some ninety-seven stories down, and its architecture is generally admired. I must apologize for bringing you in via the basement, but do not despair. You are bound for a brief stay in gleaming laboratories where comfortable, fully anesthetized experimentation upon your body will help us prepare yet another entry for our great online encyclopedia, *Anatomy and Physiology of Five Hundred More or Less Intelligent Species.* Pray step this way."

"Whoa!" thundered Fournet in his best cop voice — abrupt, gravelly and intimidating. The limits of Mr. Green's command of English immediately became apparent.

"Woe? Woe is you? Do not feel that way, good sir. You will be returned exactly to your point of departure, unharmed and with all incongruous memories erased."

"Not woe," said Fournet with disgust. "*Whoa,* like stop. Foist of all,

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you don't really retoin people to where they come from. You put Miz Zeringue ten miles away where she coulda been mugged or raped, except that the muggers and rapists from that neighborhood all got flooded out, so they still in Houston and Little Rock."

"Oh dear," said Mr. Green. From the cloak of feathers emerged two damp-looking seven-toed hands, which he began wringing. "Oh dear, oh dear. We must have drifted from our coordinates. How terribly blush-making."

Despite the enormous disadvantages Fournet faced — finding himself in another world, dimension and/or universe — the cop suddenly felt a surge of confidence. Whatever in the hell else he might be, Mr. Green was a wimp.

Fournet took a menacing step forward. "And I ain't here to assist your goddamn encyclopedia." He pulled out his temporary ID with his left hand and flashed his badge. "I'm here in an official capacity, see? I represent the, uh — "

Chief of Detectives didn't seem impressive enough, and mayor, governor, president — even Rex, King of Carnival — seemed somehow to fall short when dealing with aliens.

"I represent the *Emperor*," he averred, "and he wants to know what the hell you thinking about, snatching his subjects without his permission."

"Oh dear," said Mr. Green for the third time, and wrapped his arms around his upper body. Though probably a mere instinctive self-protective gesture, the move caused Fournet more alarm than any threat could have. Plump as Mr. Green was, his pale thin forearms wrapped seven times around him.

"Jeeeeeesus Key-rist," Fournet muttered. "A four-foot-high parakeet made of rubber bands. I never seen nothing like that, even on *Dr. Who*. What the hell I'ma put in my report, assuming I ever get to make a report? They'll think I'm nuts at Tulane and Broad."

But that was no reason to let Green off the hook. Taking a deep breath, Fournet again stepped forward, forcing himself almost into the alien's spongy beak. Glaring down at him, he barked, "Well?"

"I must," the creature warbled weakly, "take you to our Official Spokesman, whose mastery of your primitive yet complex tongue will enable him to explain the situation far better than I."

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"About frigging time somebody did," growled Fournet, and allowed himself to be bowed into the shining cube.

The elevator had a very peculiar motion. At times it seemed to be moving sideways, and there was at one point a loop-de-loop feeling, after which Fournet found that down had become up — or, at any rate, that his head rather than his feet was now leading the way toward his destination.

The shining doors opened on a kaleidoscope of senseless patterns, which spun, righted, and resolved themselves into a room somewhat like the behind-the-counter workspace of Fong's X-Quisite Hand Laundry in Algiers. A stainless-steel track hung from the ceiling, along which bundles wrapped in translucent plastic moved from right to left at a slow but steady pace.

The conveyor halted, and from between two bundles emerged a being that looked somewhat human, though only in the limited sense that a porcelain figurine looks like a shepherdess. Unlike Mr. Green, who — whatever else he might be — was clearly a living creature, the faux human spoke in a manufactured voice exactly (as Mrs. Zeringue had said) like the telephone voices that offer callers a menu that never quite meets their needs.

"You wish to enter a complaint?" it asked. Mr. Green stepped back a pace, happy to let the android (or whatever it was) field Fournet's wrath.

"Yeah. I do." Fournet then repeated his line about the wrathful emperor.

"What is your emperor's name?"

"Bush the Second."

"The name is not unfamiliar. However, we have almost completed our studies and contacting him now would be superfluous."

Fournet hardly registered the refusal. He was staring at the now motionless bundles, and suddenly demanded, "*Hey! Are those people*?"

"Some of them."

"Look — what the hell is your name — "

"You can call me Mr. White."

"Well, White," said Fournet, drawing his Glock, "you got about six seconds to try and convince me you ain't running a slaughterhouse here."

"These entities," said Mr. White, gesturing at the bundles with a cool

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white porcelain hand, "are not dead. They have merely been everted — that is to say, turned inside out — and packaged in an anesthetic solution whilst awaiting examination."

"Oh well, that makes it okay," said Fournet, with heavy irony. "So whatchoo been everting people inside out for anyway?"

"It makes their anatomy and physiology so much easier for our scientists to study. Following examination, they are reverted and returned unharmed to preset coordinates in their own sector of the multiverse."

Fournet received this information with the incredulity of a bellboy gazing at a dollar tip. "How you can turn people inside out without killing them?" he demanded.

"The bubble universe in which we reside is a nine-dimensional topological space where such eversion is possible, indeed routine, because of the perfect elasticity of what I suppose you would describe as 'matter.' The relative rigidity of your universe was at first quite confusing to us. In an early experiment we tried to evert a brahma bull through his posterior aperture, and as a result our laboratory had to be rebuilt practically from the ground down.

"Fortunately, we have learned from our first crude efforts, and have now refined our technique. As a courtesy to Bush the Second," Mr. White went on, "I will introduce you to a recent acquisition, so that you can see he is quite unharmed."

White gestured, a trapdoor appeared to open in midair, and a young man thumped down on the floor. He sat up, evidently dazed, and Fournet had leisure to note the F-word tattooed in Gothic lettering on his forehead, the varicolored plugs and rings inserted into his lips and ears, and his dreadlocks splashed randomly with bleach. He wore clothing pre-dirtied and pre-torn by the manufacturer, including clown pants with the waist adorning his crotch and crotch embracing his knees. His underpants had apparently been made from the altar cloth of a desecrated church — at any rate, they bore the inscription IHS. His T-shirt read *BLUDDY SLAWTA*.

"Oh shit, it's a effing cop," groaned Bluddy. "Every effing place I go there's effing cops, even effing here!"

White very properly ignored him. "And this is our everter, Grot."

Out of the shadows advanced an organism that, like the duck-billed platypus or the Compassionate Conservative, appeared improbable at

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first glance and still more improbable at second glance. Seemingly an uneasy cross between a very large chicken and the business end of a squid, Grot grasped the floor with skinny four-toed feet, while his five sucker-laden tentacles spread and writhed. Four small golden eyes like the brass buttons on an expensive blazer gazed at Fournet without expression.

Bluddy continued to babble, even though nobody was paying attention. "Eff aliens, eff cops, eff every effing thing," he declared, in a passionate statement of his basic philosophy of life. But to enunciate it in Fournet's presence was a mistake.

"Why don'tcha," the cop suggested to Mr. White, "tell Grot to show me how he does it? On this guy here, for instance."

Mr. White gestured commandingly. Bluddy let out a yelp, which was unwise, because Grot seized the opportunity to shove a tentacle down his throat. After a long moment filled with gargling sounds, Grot everted the rapper with one smooth yank.

"Soitny see what *he's* made of," murmured Fournet, noting the rapper's shrunken heart, diseased liver, and swollen spleen.

Meanwhile Grot plucked a transparent sack of anesthetic goo seemingly out of midair and dropped the rapper in. Another stage-magician pass with an unemployed tentacle caused the appearance of a small, gleaming mechanism that he ran along the top of the sack, sealing it with a hiss and the smell of seared plastic. Finally, he hung the bundle from an alligator clamp on the track. The track gave a lurch, and the parade of everted beings moved slowly on to whatever awaited them in the laboratory.

Anxiously, Mr. Green asked Fournet, "You perhaps find the process moderately sick-making?"

"Not after all the raw ersters I've ate. I guess Bluddy's clothes and shoes are inside out, too?"

"I presume you refer to the coverings, exterior, artificial, with which your species comes so strangely equipped?"

"Yeah. Them."

"I suppose so," shrugged Mr. Green. "As a life scientist, I am not concerned with artifacts."

Fournet had about two dozen more questions to ask, but putting them into words presented an unexpected problem. Suddenly he'd begun to feel unwell.

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He did manage to ask Mr. Green why he'd selected New Orleans for his fishing trip, and when he was going to quit snatching its already battered citizens. In reply, Green launched into a warbling disquisition, the basic idea being that disaster sites always made good places to look for laboratory subjects because with lots of people gone a few more were seldom missed, and —

And something. By now Fournet was feeling definitely uncomfortable, as if a large fist was slowly closing on his insides. Were the aliens attacking him? He stared at Grot, but all the everter's tentacles appeared to be unoccupied. Mr. White had withdrawn a few steps and sunk into statuelike immobility. Green was, of course, babbling away, though only a word here, a word there, really came through anymore.

Then really strange things started happening. The X-Quisite Hand Laundry broke up into the kaleidoscopic mess it had been originally: Grot multiplied into five or six images revolving around each other in a Ferris wheel effect. White turned inside out, showing that he was exactly the same within as without. Green's feathers each grew a staring golden eye, like the tail of a peacock.

They messing with my mind, thought Fournet. He raised his Glock and, like a cross-eyed man trying to aim at the moving figures in a shooting gallery, squeezed off a round each at Green, at White, and at Grot. But the shots sounded more like the clash of tinny cymbals than honest explosions and the bullets, instead of doing damage, drifted lazily and quite visibly into orbits around the three aliens.

For just an instant Fournet wondered if his problem was internal — if the stress of being abducted had finally sealed shut the last minuscule openings in the arteries he'd spent decades blocking with mayonnaise and fried stuff. Of course, he instantly rejected the notion that his lifestyle might be at fault, but at that point all thought came to an end. He experienced a kind of soundless explosion — a pain so intense he couldn't feel it, a blast of darkness instead of light. While hundreds of Grots and thousands of golden eyes looked on, he keeled over and hit the floor.

"Oh, how joy-making!" cried Mr. Green ecstatically. "The representative of Bush Second is dead! What an opportunity is ours! The diplomatic stand-off will soon be over!"

Reverting to his native language, he poured out a symphony of trills

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and whistles that set Grot — actually, there was only one of him — and Mr. White into furious motion in all nine of the local dimensions. Other attendants raced in from the laboratory, which was either coexistent with this room, or just next door, or several light-years away, depending on how you wished to look at it. Meanwhile, viewing the hoopla from above was none other than —

Fournet himself.

He'd always been contemptuous of so-called near-death experiences. Yet he had to admit that actually going through the process was novel and interesting. True, he felt a sense of regret tinged with grief at detaching from the large form spread out picturesquely on the floor. *I had me some good times with that old guy, him,* he thought.

Then, grief fading, he rose to the elevation of a skybox in the Superdome. From this eyrie he gazed down upon beings of the most improbable forms crowding around the corpse. Like, he mused, a bunch of Mardi Gras Indians rubbernecking the latest victim of a drive-by shooting, back in the old days when Ninth Warders were more apt to die by fire — gunfire, that is — than by water. Still, he really didn't want to see Grot do his thing to a body for which he still felt a kind of residual sympathy. Instead, he decided to take this opportunity to go sightseeing in the great city that the fat little feathered fag, Mr. Green, had spoken about.

Turning away, he drifted toward a wall that opened like a dental patient at his approach, and emerged into the vast darkness of an everted planet. The silver and ebony towers of an immense city hung like stalactites, jutted out like accusing fingers, and rose like stalagmites from an interior that made Carlsbad Caverns, which Fournet had seen once on a trip with Alma, look like a pot-hole. Crowds of beings that seemed to have no permanent shape thronged the streets, occasionally turning inside out like the pockets of arrestees being searched by Criminal Sheriff's deputies.

Perhaps for gastronomic reasons, Fournet focused on one creature — a kind of ultimate oxymoron, a giant shrimp that was truly gigantic — and watched it toe-dance through the crowd, waving its long feelers while strings of lights along its sides flashed in harmonic patterns of mustard

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and mauve resembling a 1960 jukebox. From time to time, the creature ejected its insides (including masses of fluorescent roe), swallowed itself, turned right-side out again, and continued on its way. Accompanying the whole process were sounds sometimes like the bagpipes at a cop's funeral, sometimes like the partially blocked plumbing at Parish Prison.

Actually, thought Fournet, the process *was* sort of sick-making, when you came right down to it. *No,* he decided, *I can't get used to this goddamn place, it's even weirder than Alabama.*

He wanted to return to wherever he'd left his body, but what did returning mean, exactly? If he approached something, it drifted away; if he turned away from something, it followed in his slipstream, like flotsam trailing the Algiers ferry to the dock.

How *does* a former human escape from a nine-dimensional topographical space, or whatever the hell Mr. White called it? Was this to be his, Fournet's, own version of Eternity, drifting forever through an alien universe, like an LSD junkie taking an eternal bad trip at an everlasting Mardi Gras?

He was preoccupied with this metaphysical question when he felt a tug. The tug strengthened into a definite pull. Instinctively he resisted, but the pull became a yank, a drag, a haul. A syncopated drumbeat that was somehow familiar began and strengthened until it deafened him. He roared, but made no sound; he threshed around, but couldn't combat the force. He felt like a leaf caught in Katrina; he felt like dust sucked into a Hoover; he felt like a cockroach trapped in the vortex of a toilet. He —

...was walking along Paris Road, with Bluddy Slawta at his side. He knew it was Paris Road because a sign still clung to a crazily leaning lamppost. All around stretched a wild growth of willows and ragweed filled with chanting frogs, sonorous cicadas, and the ridgepoles of shattered houses.

"Maddog," Fournet muttered.

How had he gotten here, anyway? The last thing he remembered was stepping into a FEMA trailer in the Seventh Ward. He checked, and found himself properly dressed — size XXL Fruit of the Looms and a much-laundered tee on top, then a clean white-on-white shirt with the buttons and collar inside, a narrow knitted tie like the first birthday present Alma

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had ever given him — indeed, it *was* the first birthday present she'd ever given him — and finally, lying comfortably next to his skin, an inside-out wash 'n' wear summer suit. So at least he didn't look funny.

His shoes, however, hurt. Having the heels on the inside might not be the best arrangement, though offhand he couldn't think of a better one. Also, the rough blacktop surface of Paris Road was shredding the orthopedic socks he wore to combat varicose veins. He paused and bent over to check his ankles, finding to his surprise that the customary pattern of blue vessels had disappeared, along with the puffy white swelling, resembling cottage cheese, that he was used to. Most remarkable of all, when he straightened up, his head didn't spin and he wasn't gasping for air.

Huh, he thought, and said, "Wonk ooey, doog lear leef I," to his companion. Instead of answering like a human being, Bluddy glared at him with contempt and loathing. He erected the middle finger of his right hand and, to Fournet's astonishment, began jabbing it hard and repeatedly into his own eye, yelling as he did so, "Cuff ooey! Wo! Cuff ooey! Wo!"

"Elohssa," muttered Fournet. Then he forgot both his puzzlement and his obnoxious companion, as a Hummer full of gum-chewing Guardsmen turned into Paris Road and headed toward them.

WHEN D. J. ARRIVED at the hospital next morning, he found Fournet awaiting him in a private room, with Alma and a neat young resident in green scrubs at his side. She had brought and Fournet had donned enormous new pajamas covered with little red arrow-pierced hearts inscribed, "Love Ya, Babe."

Hearts, or at any rate the blood vessels leading to them, were on the resident's mind, too. He was checking a printout of some ultrasound tests and saying, "Sir, you have the most beautiful circulation I've ever seen in a man your age. Your arteries must be wide open, without any plaque buildup whatever. It's almost as if they'd been scrubbed."

"That's becuz I eat right," said Fournet complacently. "Incidentally, Doc, you can tell the noice to take that stuff" — he gestured at the hospital breakfast, resting on the bedside table — "and feed it to a gator. They'll eat anything."

"Don't you worry, Sweetheart," said Alma. "I lost you for two whole

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weeks, but now we going home. I'ma fix you a real breakfast — three eggs over easy, grits with a big lump of butter, pork sausage and buttermilk biscuits and about a gallon of chickory coffee with Half-and-Half and plenty sugar."

"And fresh-squeezed urnge juice," added Fournet. "Gotta keep healthy."

He turned his attention to D. J. "I know you gonna ask me where I been at. The short answer is, I don't know."

D. J. shrugged. "Wherever it was, you musta done good there, because we got all our people back. Mary Margaret Trudeau was found taking a stroll along the levee in Jefferson Parish in her pantyhose and D-cups. Harry J. Symms showed up for woik yestriddy with his company demolishing wrecked houses in Lakeview. Didn't even know he'd been away, and when the guys started making a fuss over him, he looked confused and kept saying, 'Attamassaw? Attamassaw?'"

The resident interjected, "I was just about to ask Mr. Fournet if he had any sequelae to his experience. Any aftereffects," he explained.

"Well," said Fournet, "I had me a weird dream last night."

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"Nightmare?"

"No, just weird. An octopus had grabbed my Glock — by the way, D. J., you all ain't found that, have you?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Well, you owe me for it. I lost it in line of duty. Anyway, the octopus kept messing with it, and it blew off a tentacle. Soived him right."

"Anybody can't shoot," said D. J., "shouldn't have a gun. Look, Alphonse, we appreciate you coming back outa retirement to take this on and tie it up like you did. Now we got us another little problem — "

"No," declared Alma. "You ain't taking my sweetheart away from me again. The answer is no. Unnerstand? N-O means no."

"Okay, okay. But see, there's some people moved back into Noo Awlyunz East, and they're the only ones for miles around, and they say at night they hear all these folks got drowned crying for help inside the wrecks of their houses. I know it sounds nuts, but — "

"No," said Alma for the third time. "We got to save the living, right, but we also got to let the dead go. Otherwise we'll never get over Katrina. So D. J., you just go on back to Tulane and Broad and let Alphonse get dressed and come home with me. This adventure is over."

"You just hoid from the boss," said Fournet, swallowing his saliva, which had begun running at thought of the promised breakfast. "Over is over."

This was true, except for Bluddy Slawta. His superhit *Eff the Effing Multiverse* was hailed by *The New Yorker*'s discerning rap critic as "a powerful statement of rebellion and rage, filled with a searing sense of personal vulnerability and metaphysical disillusionment."

More important, it sold by the gazillion and lifted him high into the hip-hop firmament. Soon he was endorsing presidential candidates in such time as he could spare from promoting his new and popular brand of men's underwear — intended, of course, to be worn on top of one's outerwear.

All of which proved, as Fournet told Alma one evening over a meal that began with oysters Rockefeller and went on from there, that the universe really *must* be kind of inside out, after all.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Dossouye, by Charles R. Saunders, Sword and Soul Media, 2008, $19.95.

HERE'S A book I've been waiting to see for thirty years — all the way back to when I read the first Dossouye story in 1978 (it appeared in Jessica Amanda Salmonson's *Amazons!* the following year).

Dossouye is the female counterpart to Charles Saunders's Imaro character — sort of the way Red Sonja is with Conan (and yes, I know; Red Sonja is more Rob Thomas's character than Robert E. Howard's, but you know what I mean). Dossouye's story is set in the same alternate Africa as the Imaro books, but she's not simply a female version of Saunders's more well-known creation. Both characters are disenfranchised from their birth community and forced to wander in exile — which allows for many and varied adventures — but Dossouye's story draws more heavily on traditional African mythology than the heroic fantasy wizards and monsters that Imaro often confronts.

Neither's better than the other — at least not for a heroic fantasy enthusiast; they're just different. Mind you, I think of Saunders's work as historical adventure fantasy because the stories are set in a meticulously researched real historical background, but there is magic. Didn't know that Africa had cities and a widespread civilization in the long ago? Neither did I until I read Saunders's work and then went back and followed the path of some of his research. It's utterly fascinating stuff, but more to the point, Saunders writes an adventure story that'll keep you on the edge of the seat from the first page.

Most of the material here appeared as short stories in anthologies such as that edited by Salmonson mentioned above, as well as ones

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edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley, and more recently, Sheree R. Thomas's terrific *Dark Matter* anthologies. But all the stories have been rewritten and the book reads more like an episodic novel than simply a collection of stories.

Most of those books have been out of print for some time and it would take some effort to track them down. For my part, I'm delighted to have the stories gathered together here and I don't doubt that once you start to follow the adventures of Dossouye and her war-bull Gbo, you'll be as taken with the character as I am.

Look for *Dossouye* in your local bookstore, but if they don't carry it, point your browser to *www.charlessaunderswriter.com* for ordering information.

Year's Best Fantasy 8, edited by David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer, Tachyon Publications, 2008, $14.95.

I like *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, a different annual gathering together of fantasy stories than the one I'm reviewing here. Its editors make a real effort to look beyond the expected places (genre magazines and anthologies) to introduce us to treasures and authors we might not otherwise encounter. But I also appreciate the effort of editors such as Hartwell and Cramer who shine the light on stories published in the genre.

One's not better than the other. Rather, they complement each other. And their flavor is certainly different. *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* often offers up experimental writing styles and metafiction with stories that can require the reader to spend a little time working out what actually happened. The experimental nature of some of the prose and storytelling is often fascinating in its own right.

I love the sense of adventure one can get from such a story, and the way the material pushes at the boundaries of not only the accepted practices of storytelling, but also the readers' minds.

Hartwell's & Cramer's anthology has more traditional stories, or rather, stories told in a more traditional manner, focusing on linear narratives and characterization, and I love that, too.

Of course, I'm generalizing here. Neither anthology focuses entirely on what I've described above, but as generalizations go, I'm not too far off the map. And what's interesting is how mostly

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there is very little overlap between the two (although I haven't seen the contents of the Datlow/Link & Grant offering for this year). Most years, the discerning reader will find things to love in both without spending money on the same material.

If I have any bone to pick with Hartwell & Cramer's selection (and really, won't every reader ask, "Well, what about...?"), it's that they couldn't seem to find one Richard Parks story to include (and I know they read *Realms of Fantasy*, where Parks's stories usually appear).

However, making up for that oversight, they do have terrific material from the likes of Fred Chappell, Holly Black, Don Webb, Garth Nix, and a host of other notables.

The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch, by Neil Gaiman, Michael Zulli & Todd Klein, Dark Horse Books, 2008, $13.95.

Great story, great art, but here we have a case where the individual components are actually better than the work as a whole.

The problem begins with the story. It's one of Gaiman's more entertaining pieces, featuring himself as a character relating a curious adventure in London featuring a strange circus and the mystery alluded to in the title. It has appeared before as a short story and in an audio format where its conversational tone adds to our appreciation. As does Gaiman's own presence in the story, allowing readers the fun question of wondering where reality gives way to imagination. Surely, we think we know, but what if...?

The art distracts from all of that.

Now, I'm a big fan of Zulli's work. I love the loose, painterly quality of his art, but he's also one of those artists who shines with each individual panel, but not so much with the narrative flow *from* panel to panel, an essential quality for sequential art such as this. The art also distracts from the natural rhythm of the story when read as prose, or better still, listened to in audio format — probably because half the fun is the narrator's descriptions of things. Here, they're simply presented to us.

None of which is to say the book's a disaster. On the contrary, I found it quite charming. But I would hate to be a reader who wasn't already familiar with the story coming to it in this version, because they might find it a slight piece,

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where in another format it's entirely beguiling.

Anthem of a Reluctant Prophet, by Joanne Proulx, Viking Canada, 2007, Cdn$28.

The author photo of this first novel shows a woman with blonde hair who looks to be in her thirties. But the narrative voice in this novel — that of a teen boy who's somewhat of a loser but has flashes of precognizance — is so strong that a couple of times I looked at that author photo and wondered how the woman in that picture disappeared into the voice of Luke Hunter.

Luke's flashes of precognizance only manage to screw up his life more than it already is. And while we want to give him a good shake from time to time, Proulx manages to keep Luke likable and still a loser.

But he's not a slightly befuddled, charming *Peanuts* Charlie Brown. Luke is a doper, living in a small to mid-sized town, not doing great in school, no real friends, no girlfriend. A night out is hanging in the basement of one of the guys. It's there that one evening Luke has a sudden premonition of the death of one of his companions. In that focused intensity that can come with being stoned, he describes the coming death in minute detail, then points to Stan (someone Luke actually likes) and tells him it'll happen to him.

General laughter ensues, Luke gets called on his B.S., but the next day Stan is killed in an accident involving a van exactly the way Luke described it, right down to the license plate number.

Then it happens again. Luke sees his elderly neighbor die and does what he can to forestall the coming accident, but without success. The difference this time is that after the media circus following his first prediction, Luke is smart enough to keep any other premonitions to himself. But it's tough on him, because not only does he have to deal with this weird "gift," he also has all the other problems of a teen boy stuck in a dead-end town with no hope it'll get any better.

Anthem of a Reluctant Prophet is a contemporary coming of age story that feels authentic to its times. It has some rough language and doesn't shy away from depicting the kinds of things that a lot of teens do — in other words, they're not squeaky clean the way the kids are in the Stephenie Meyer *Twilight* books. They have sex, they toke up,

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but it's all just part of the story, rather than its focus.

The focus is on death and Luke's preoccupation with it, given his inexplicable premonitions. So yes, it's a serious, and at times, dark book, but it's far from a depressing read. And while there's no big Hollywood ending, what I like about Proulx's writing is that, throughout the book, the reader never quite knows where she's going with the various elements of her plot, yet once we get to where she takes us, it all makes perfect sense.

And boy, does she get the voice right.

Highly recommended.

An Evil Guest, by Gene Wolfe, Tor Books, 2008, $25.95.

Gene Wolfe's latest novel is such a mix of styles and ideas that I hardly know where to begin talking about it. It's set in the future, with lots of science fictional elements, but the tone is definitely that of one of those old black-and-white films from the '40s or '50s. There's the opening of a Broadway show. Cold war-styled shenanigans. The classic cast lineup: show girl, mysterious doctor/detective, industrial billionaire, with a supporting cast of reporters, agents and actors, spies and FBI agents. A noir feel that reminded me as much of Dashiell Hammett's hardboiled mysteries as it did *Bladerunner*.

Oh, and then there's that sense of something Lovecraftian looming behind it all.

The plot seems linear, but episodic, except when you think about it, it really *is* linear. There are long fascinating conversations between the characters, sudden bursts of action, futuristic marvels that are mentioned in passing, and throughout it all, mystery, mystery, mystery.

Wolfe is a rather fascinating writer. While his projects vary wildly, his authorial voice remains true to whatever genre he's working in. That's hard enough to pull off as effortlessly as Wolfe does, but it gets even more complicated when half the "genres" in which he works exist only in his books.

In *The Evil Guest*, the narrative voice is a disarming blend of noir and wiseacre which I loved.

As I was reading, I couldn't help but cast the three leads in my mind: the industrialist was Orson Welles, Rosalind Russell played the part of the showgirl Cassie Casey, and of course there could only be Cary Grant in the role of the mysterious detective, Dr. Chase.

Needless to say, as with any

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Wolfe book, it's highly recommended.

Odd Hours, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2008, $27.

Koontz is back with another book about Odd Thomas, and I'm glad he is.

In this fourth outing, Odd is a long way from his home town of Pico Mundo, CA. He's a long way, as well, from the monastery where he tried to get away from the world in volume three. But when you can see ghosts and get vague premonitions of the future, it doesn't really matter where you go. Trouble will find you.

This time out, he, his ghost dog Boo, and the ghost of Frank Sinatra (Elvis having "left the building" in the previous novel) find themselves in a small California coastal town. Dreams of a coming "red tide" bring Odd to the town pier where he meets the enigmatic Annamaria — pregnant, young and alone, and in terrible danger. It's not clear what the men threatening her want, and that doesn't get resolved as their threat evolves into a terrorist plot, making this the first of the books in the series that leaves some big unanswered questions at the end. In fact, it's the first of the four volumes to feel like a middle book in a series.

But that would only be problematic if *Odd Hours* weren't as entertaining as it is. Yes, once the plot gets into gear, it's a fast-paced book like the rest in the series. But what really makes this series so readable is Odd's first person voice, a mix of the matter-of-fact with sometimes wry, sometimes hilarious observations of the world at large, as well as the specific situations in which Odd finds himself.

Of course there *is* the frustration of having to wait to find out what mysteries Annamarie hides.

The Hidden Variable, by The Hidden Variable, Music & Lyrics, 2008; 55:30 min. CD

A while ago I got an email from Chris Ewen of the electropop band Future Bible Heroes asking if I had any song lyrics for a project he was putting together. He planned to get lyrics from a number of fantasy writers, write music for them, then put them all together on an album (excuse me, should I have said CD?). Since I liked what I'd heard of his band, and it was the closest I figured I'd ever get to being part of a rock 'n' roll project, I said yes. I pulled a song from a novel I've been

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working on off and on for a few years and sent it to him.

I didn't hear anything until another email showed up a few months later with an MP3 attachment, asking me if I liked what he'd done with the song. I loved it. It's a bit of a subdued, dark rhythmic piece with some subtle glam rock flourishes playing behind this wonderful singer named Malena Teves.

Now I don't mention this here to tout my horn, as it were. Rather, I bring it to your attention because I think you'll get as much of a kick as I did at seeing what some of your favorite fantasy writers can do in a very different setting. Let me name-check the other participants in no particular order: Neil Gaiman, Peter Straub, China Miéville, Gahan Wilson, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Emma Bull, Poppy Z. Brite, Martha Soukup, Lemony Snicket, Shelley Jackson, Harvey Jacobs, and Gregory Maguire.

Besides Teves, who does all the lead vocals, and Ewen, who plays all the instruments, it also features Lorraine Garland (of Flash Girls fame) on violin. I like the whole album, but while I got a kick out of listening to Peter Straub waxing poetic about Rosemary Clooney on his cut, the best track on the album is Gregory Maguire's "Kindermärchen."

It's a seriously fun project and should be available by the time this column sees print. Point your browser to *www.hiddenvariable.net* for more info. Or just go to the band's MySpace page and listen to the songs. (The easiest way to reach the latter is simply to Google "Hidden Variable" and "MySpace.")

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

All the Windwracked Stars, by Elizabeth Bear, Tor, 2008, $24.95.

Zoë's Tale, by John Scalzi, Tor, 2008, $24.95.

The Iron Hunt, by Marjorie M. Liu, Ace, 2008, $7.99.

ELIZABETH Bear's latest novel (or at least the one I'm reviewing, since I think by this time there are three in total) is hard to characterize. Or perhaps hard to pin down. It is not, strictly speaking, fantasy; it is not, strictly speaking, science fiction. It's some blend of both that involves so many tropes from either genre — all of them leaning on the echoes of myth and legend that she's heard and made her own — that it should fall apart under its own weight. But it doesn't. That's the marvel of *All the Windwracked Stars*.

This book starts with the end of the world. No, really. One could assume, given the starting point, that the book would then delve backward into the past that led to that point. It doesn't. Instead, it gives the three survivors of a bloody battle a moment of bonding in, yes, a smaller bloody battle, and it leaves them changed. That one of the three, Kasimir, is a two-headed winged creature that chooses a rider for life doesn't diminish this; that another, Muire, is *waelcyrge*, the least of her sisters, but the only one to survive, hints at the Norse myths and legends that have all but ended with this battle.

Muire stays to bury the dead, while the third and last survivor, silent and unseen, settles down to wait for the last of the world to flicker out and die. He is Mingan, and he has seen the death of worlds; he settles in, here, and he waits.

The world takes a long, long time to die: history unfolds, technology changes, cities and civilizations rise and fall. Mortality is not an issue for any of the three, but their world has been swept aside

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and they drift in the new one, observing, interacting.

And the new world? As science-fictional as they come, but with the added kick of technomancy, used to support the last of humanity on a world which will otherwise destroy life.

Here, in this final stronghold, Muire, Mingan, and Kasimir will meet again, seeking different things, and bringing the pain of their shared history and shared anger to bear. They will discover the souls of their fallen, reborn as humans, or almost-humans; they will discover the truth behind the end of the world, and the one possible chance they have to save it. And they will do this as broken, scarred individuals, because there are no whole people in this book. Bear makes this *work*, depriving anyone of the simple status of either hero or villain by revealing enough, in layers, that all we're left with is fact and our own judgments.

But this is not really why you should read this book; you should read it because the entire thing — from beginning to end — pushes sense-of-wonder buttons so hard you almost want to hit the pause button, forget about the plot, and *look*. Bear holds nothing back, and everything that she pulls into her story just gleams with that special wonder of discovery.

I could not put this down. If you liked *Dust*, this novel is, in my humble opinion, better.

Zoë Perry, the title character of *Zoë's Tale*, should be familiar to readers of John Scalzi's works. The adopted daughter of John and Jane Perry, she's a teenage girl with attitude, a certain charm, and two deadly alien bodyguards who record her every move (except on the rare occasions when she forbids it). The bodyguards, members of the Obin race, have been hers for most of her life, and it's a life that includes being the sole human survivor of two alien attacks on an orbital space station, and then being the eventual linchpin of an important Colonial Union peace treaty with the Obin.

So it can be taken for granted that her life is not what could be considered normal. First introduced in *The Ghost Brigade*, she followed her parents into *The Lost Colony*, and in that latter book she performed a pivotal negotiation upon which the whole story depended — and she did so entirely offstage. This was not to the liking of some readers, and Scalzi took it on himself to write *Zoë's Tale* in response.

Zoë is not in the driver's seat,

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and she's not terribly interested in the day-to-day run-up of establishing a colony. She would like to be a normal girl, if a deeply sarcastic one. The deep sarcasm, of course, is one of the delights of a Scalzi narrative, and it's here in abundance, as are the usual quirky characters and the way Scalzi undermines stereotypes and gently forces us to examine our own initial reactions. Some of the seat-of-the-pants chutzpah is missing, given Zoë's age and mindset.

A lot of the book is about Zoë's friendships, her first boyfriend, and her adjustment to life in a colony that was created solely to be a big, red flag to the bull of the Conclave's military fleet. It adds to and expands on things set up in *The Lost Colony*, giving the day-to-day life, and the questions it raises, more play and more grounding.

The book comes into its own when Zoë is sent by her father to talk with the general in control of the Conclave, the military enemies to the human Colonial Union. There, without her parents or her friends, she's forced to accept what being the effective Chosen One of the Obin has meant to her, and what it might mean in the future, and it directly affects her ability to save the people she loves.

However....

This book is a companion piece to *The Lost Colony*. It doesn't truly stand alone, so if you haven't read *The Lost Colony*, read it first. Honestly. Because if you read it first, you'll enjoy *Zoë's Tale*, and if you don't, there's a good chance that the abrupt end of the novel will frustrate you. It's a good place to end a companion book, because the end result of all of the various political machinations that afflict the colony of Roanoake, in the hands of John Perry, is already detailed in *The Lost Colony*, and as such, it's not necessary here.

And it's *not* here. Don't start here. But if you've read the other novels in the John Perry series, this is a great place to end.

Marjorie M. Liu is well known for her Dirk and Steele paranormal romances — none of which I've read. This is my first foray into Liu's work, and it seemed a reasonable place to dip a toe in because it's the first book in a new series. I should say up front that I'm one of those readers who is just a little bit tired of pages of sex threaded around the bare bones of plot, and I worried a little when I picked up this book that *The Iron Hunt* would end up being one of those.

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I was dead wrong. This is straight-up urban fantasy, and not only is sex absent, but in those cases where it could actually fit into the story without the plot twisting and bending to accommodate it, Liu closes the door to give her characters some privacy. What's left is all plot, which made me happy.

Maxine Kiss is the last of a line of demon hunters, in a world where demons have been slipping between the cracks of the Veil that was created to separate the demons from the rest of the world. She's been raised and trained, by a mother on the move, to do nothing but *be* a demon hunter. Her mother was the Hunter before her, and her mother's death can be laid directly at Maxine's feet, because the Hunter is given demons to aid her in her struggle, and those demons stay with the Hunter until the Hunter's daughter is strong enough to bear both their power and their weight. These demons — the boys, as Maxine affectionately calls them — reside on her skin in the form of flat and changing tattoos during the sunlight. For all intents and purposes, they make her invulnerable. It's at night that they take on separate, living forms, so it's at night that she's vulnerable, although they're still there to aid her.

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When "the boys" decided that Maxine was strong enough to carry them, they abandoned her mother, and her mother died almost instantly thereafter. Maxine is now the Hunter, and she knows that one day she'll bear a child who will in effect kill her in the same way. Because that's how Hunters have always died. They've also always lived in isolation. But Maxine is different.

In a short piece that appeared in the anthology *Wild Thing*, "Hunter Kiss," Liu apparently introduces both Maxine and her partner, Grant, an ex-priest who can see the aura of demons and who can sing in a way that heals and brings peace. I say apparently because I haven't read this either. I'm going to try to hunt it down, because I'm curious to see how Grant and Maxine came together — but not knowing doesn't actually take away from the novel.

Suffice it to say that when *The Iron Hunt* opens, Maxine is living in a shelter with Grant and some of the people for whom he cares. Although she knows that the Hunter always lives in isolation, she wants — and needs — friends, and she's accepted this, although it weighs on her, making her doubt her fitness and her strength.

When the police come to the shelter, she's a bit surprised; when they come looking *for* Maxine Kiss, she's worried. She uses aliases, and that's her real name — and to complicate matters, they're looking for her because her real name was scrawled on a newspaper in a murdered detective's pocket. She's never heard of the murdered man, but the fact of his death and his profession draw her out — with the boys — in search of answers.

What she discovers is evidence of her own ignorance. The demons she knows are not the only demons in existence. The prison dimension of the Veil is about to crumble, after millennia of slow decay, and demons whose power and motivations she can't even begin to comprehend are beginning to leak out into our world. Some of them are looking for her, but not for the obvious reasons.

Maxine Kiss is an interesting addition to the urban fantasy genre. *The Iron Hunt* raises more questions than it answers, and if it has one weakness, it's the end; the conclusion almost feels anticlimactic, given some of the reveals. But with that reservation? This was fast-paced, entertaining, and a whole lot of fun — the book *moves*, and I'm looking forward to seeing where Liu goes with the series.

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Mr. Utley was recently seen online inviting fans to pen blurbs for his latest story, but after some consideration, we here at F&SF *decided the best way to introduce "Sleepless Years" is to say "Here's a great story. Read it."*

Mr. Utley then hastened to add that his publishers would appreciate it if we were to mention his story collections, The Beasts of Love *and* Where or When, *so after you finish this gem, you'll know where to look for more stories from this great writer.*

Sleepless Years

By Steven Utley

I WOULD LIKE TO SLEEP NOW. I would. I've told them this, they've asked, they're interested in how I'm feeling, every time they ask, I tell them, "I would like to sleep now." I find myself emphasizing different words whenever I say it. *I* would like to sleep now. I *would* like to sleep now. They hang on everything I say. I would *like* to sleep now. I have little else to say to them any more, so I say it often. I would like to *sleep* now. They seem never to tire of hearing me say it. I would like to sleep *now.*

They listen attentively, but, then, every sound I make fascinates them, every move I make, every gesture. Each throb of cardiac muscle, each rippling contraction of intestine, is miraculous anyway. That the reanimated meat also possesses desires and can actually express them in words is almost more than they dared expect, though certainly not more than they hoped. That, after all, was the point. They may once have had their doubts, but now they have me.

So I keep them riveted to their monitoring devices. There must be monitoring devices everywhere within the walls of my quarters. Perhaps

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even within my own body, too. My own body, spying on me, getting even with me for the violence I did to it. Getting back at me and getting away with it, too. "Well," it would say (ah, sweet dualism!), "you can't be trusted, you know."

But, this matter of sleep. Early on, I complained to my chief tormentor, Kawanishi. You should consider yourself lucky, Kawanishi said, the average person sleeps away a third of his life.

I have no life to sleep away, I said.

Well, in the event, you no longer require sleep.

Doctor, *require* has nothing to do with it. I *want* to sleep.

He said, The sleep center of your brain no longer functions. For all practical purposes, it was destroyed.

Much more of my brain than that was destroyed, in fact, but this man claimed to have rebuilt much with cultures. I told him, People have to dream. They go crazy if they don't.

Do you feel, he asked me, as though (and he grimaced, he hates it when I force him to use unscientific terms) you are going crazy?

Going, I said, going, I told him, gone!

But you are doing so well.

Not bad for a zombie.

He shook his head and said, firmly, Your heart rate is excellent. Your stools are firm. Some of our subjects show strong reactions to cryoprotectants, but not you.

Kawanishi is and always has been primarily, almost exclusively, interested in the mechanical end of things, and so he lets on that, as far as he's concerned, he's done his job. I like to believe, have to believe, that the fact I may indeed be insane bothers him. After all, his process is useless if it drives its subject mad.

And if he doesn't have his doubts, why would I spend so much time talking to his colleague Barnes? Barnes is the psychiatrist, and one effect of Kawanishi's handiwork particularly fascinates her.

What scientist ever bothered to explain anything to his laboratory animals? How they found me, why they chose me, what they did to capture the *I* of me and thrust it back into the meticulously repaired and miraculously revitalized *it* of me — mysteries, mysteries all. I awoke cold

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and in the worst pain I'd ever known. I awoke to chaos. My subconscious self had emerged from its murky sea depths and cleanly fused itself to my conscious self. I was seamless ego from forebrain to pituitary gland. Everything was there, memories, shadows, ghosts. Who would have thought that resurrecting one person could call back so many others? Who would have thought that I of all people should be so lucky as to be reunited with my lost ones in the next life?

When I could speak (many months after my awakening, and after much therapy), I said, I want it to end. I want oblivion and darkness and silence.

I'm afraid that what you want, Kawanishi replied, is of no consequence to me. There are bigger issues at stake here than what you want. Much bigger ones.

You've got no right to do this to me. I have a right to die and be left alone.

Kawanishi shrugged that off, but later the same day I received an unexpected visit from a stranger who identified himself as a lawyer. He did not say whom he represented. He pulled papers from his briefcase, spread them on the table between us, and said, You *had* a right to die. You exercised it, and now your option has expired. We merely salvaged the wreckage and put it to our own good use. Here are the papers. See? All perfectly legal. You stipulated that your body be donated for scientific research.

My *body*. Not *me*.

Well, no one really imagined that you'd still inhabit it, though, of course, the whole object —

That *was* the whole object, wasn't it? Not just to reanimate a corpse, but to bring back the dead. You bastards! *I'm* in here. I'm in *here!*

All perfectly legal.

Let me tell you about the afterlife. There's a special pit in Hell for lawyers.

The lawyer merely smiled.

I know what Hell's like, I told him. Oh, believe me, sonny, I know where you go!

He didn't believe a word of what I said, of course. Being a lawyer, he'd heard it before, and worse.

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I realized soon enough that this facility (wherever it is), these people, this project, must all cost a great deal of money. I am the center of attention, I suspect, not for my own sake, but for someone else's. I imagine shadowy figures must lurk behind the doctors and technicians and peer over their shoulders at me. These shadowy folk probably do not possess any of the most brilliant minds of our age, but they have much of its wealth and power sewn up, and they see in me the possibility of their being permitted to retain their stranglehold on the world indefinitely. Possibly, as Kawanishi puts it, forever. If they can't take it with them, they just won't go. We're talking the resurrection and the life everlasting here.

With immortality practically within reach, the shadowy folk must be getting impatient.

I have considered the form my revenge should take. At first I thought to convince Kawanishi and Barnes somehow that my sanity no longer was in question; I would keep up this pretense until Time overtook the shadowy folk and each of them in turn submitted to Kawanishi's process, returned from the dead but returned insane, returned to suffer as I suffer....

But I believe the course I now pursue is better. Let them go on hoping that my madness can and will be cured in time. Let them go on fretting. My one pleasure in this place is the knowledge that in dying they stand to lose more than I did, because they must want to live.

Oh, they must want so very desperately to live.

DAY COMES, as day always does. Everyone awakens. I get my breakfast. I pull on a dressing gown over my pajamas, slip my feet into slippers, and am dressed for the day. Then comes Barnes, who, as usual, asks me questions about myself and encourages me to answer them at length. She's always been careful not to call me by name, but apart from that, our relationship's not bad, as relationships in this place go. Kawanishi is your basic overenthusiastic mad-doctor type, and the attendants speak to me only to ask the most basic questions, e.g., "Are you ready to go to bed?" or to give the most unsympathetic answers, e.g., "No, you may not go outside."

(For me, going to bed is pointless, of course, and I have never been permitted to go outside.)

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Very early on, soon after I found myself in this place, I told Barnes, The doctor gives me the creeps.

She asked, Which doctor? There're several doctors working here. I'm a doctor, too, you know.

She knew exactly whom I meant, but she was into her routine. I said, The one who examines me every morning. The Chinese one.

Actually, she says, he's Japanese. No, actually, he's as American as you and me. He's from Los Angeles.

Los Angeles isn't America. It's Mars.

Barnes looked at me in astonishment. You made a joke!

Not much of a joke.

Still, a joke. That's good. That's progress. That's very good.

Another breakthrough, I said to myself, and to her, Why is that good?

It means you're on your way back to mental as well as physical well-being.

I thought, I'm not on my way back to anything, but I said to her, Some well-being. I'm stiff and sore and weak.

She smiled. That's normal.

Nothing about this situation is normal, Doctor, and we both know it. When I dived into the water, I knew I was going to die. The water was very cold. I knew I was going to die.

Well, she said, you have Doctor Kawanishi to thank for the fact that you didn't die.

What do I have to thank you for, Doctor Barnes?

I try to help people like you adjust.

There are others like me?

She ignored that question.

Well, then, I said, what shall we talk about today?

What do you want to talk about?

God. Why don't we talk about God?

Have you been thinking about God lately?

I've been thinking about God all my life. I come from a long line of Pentecostals and Southern Baptists. No wonder I'm screwed up in the head, right? Incidentally, true Southerners always pronounce it Bab-tist.

Duly noted, she said.

As for Pentecostals, they emphasize revivalist worship and baptism,

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faith healing, glossolalia, premillennial teaching. Between the ages of six and eleven, I spent part of every summer at my grandparents' home. My visits always coincided with a weeklong series of nightly revival meetings at a cinder-block tabernacle built on land donated by my great-grandfather. I saw and heard people speak in tongues, I saw the faith healers. I can hear the music. Sister Blanche on piano, with her good strong left hand, and all the people singing as though it were salvation itself. "I'm going to have a little talk with Jesus, I'm going to tell him all about my troubles." And, "When we all get to Heh-vun, what a day of rejoicing that will be!" Whatever else Pentecostals are, they're exuberant singers.

What about you? Barnes said.

I can't carry a tune in a bucket. Anyway, even as a child I started singing it, "When we all get to Ho-hum."

No, I mean, what do you believe in?

I'm an agnostic. I have been most of my life. I'm not an atheist only because, one, I can't prove there isn't a God, and, two, it takes too much energy to go around actively believing there isn't a God.

Still, if you think about God a lot, even though you say you're not convinced God exists —

It means God's always with me, in a way. Perverse, no?

Barnes clasped her hands in her lap. How do you see God? I mean, even if you reject God as a concept, describe the concept you reject?

Well, first of all, I don't believe in this big omnipotent, omnipresent personality — the old man with the long white beard. But I do believe in other people's belief in that, and in a strange way I guess that means I believe in it, too. I hold that God responsible for all the terrible things he allows to happen to his believers. Never mind nonbelievers. It seems to me that if you're God and you tell people that they ought to have faith in you, you ought to keep faith with them. And the Christian God, this supposedly just, loving, caring, merciful deity, doesn't.

Whom do you feel God broke faith with?

Let me tell you about that. Let me tell you about my sister Ann and God and me. One day when Ann and I were little kids, she introduced me to the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. It had obviously excited her imagination, though (here I essay a small joke to show Barnes that I am capable of being funny twice in a single afternoon) Heaven knows where she'd heard it. Our

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parents weren't churchgoers then. Our maternal grandparents and great-grandparents, devout Pentecostals all, had thus far told us only what they apparently felt were the less grisly and more uplifting Biblical tales — the baby in the manger, Ruth and Naomi, the Deluge. My sister came to me as I sat reading a Superman comic book. Her concise account of the crucifixion went like this: "Once upon a time, God came down from the sky. Some people got mad at him, and they stuck him on a cross. Then he went back up to Heaven." And as she told me this, she demonstrated just how God had been stuck on a cross. Otherwise, I'd have had no idea of what a cross was. She thrust straight pins through the hands and feet of Little Lulu, whom she'd carefully clipped from the cover of one of her own comic books, into a cross made with two strips of green construction paper.

Barnes laughs and shakes her head. I'm sorry, she says, that image is just so funny.

Yeah. Imagine cutting up a perfectly good comic book.

No, I mean — well, never mind. Go on.

I didn't believe the crucifixion story for a second and said so. "God," I told Ann, "stays up in the sky. Even if he did come down, he wouldn't let people stick pins in his hands!" This sounded unassailably logical to me. Superman, who likewise spent a lot of time in the sky and, furthermore, could stop the moon in its orbit with one hand — well, Superman sure wouldn't have put up with anybody trying to shove pins through his hands, and God was supposed to be at least as strong as Superman. I took the matter to the highest authority, my grandmother. "Is God big and strong?" Why, honey, he's the most powerful thing there is. "Did he get stuck on a cross?" Yes, and he died for our sins, so we can go to Heaven. I went away more perplexed than ever. Something did not compute. And thus I ricocheted, not for the last time, off the whole concept of God. Throughout the rest of my childhood and into my early teens, I crossed God's path, or he crossed mine, like Pluto straying across the orbit of Neptune, without my ever attaining more than a momentary belief in him. I wasn't unwilling, not then, anyway, to have faith in his love, his power, his wisdom. I was just incapable.

How long? I once asked Barnes in Kawanishi's presence. How soon before you're through with me?

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Through with you? (Barnes sometimes echoes like that.) What do you mean?

How long are you going to keep me *alive*?

Why, Doctor Kawanishi said, radiant with pride, we can probably keep you alive indefinitely. Forever. Why not?

That was when I tried to kill myself again. Everyone was quite angry about it. Everyone must have expected me to be grateful. After this attempt, my environment was rendered absolutely safe. Now there are no sharp corners, no hard edges, anywhere in my quarters. Kawanishi and his people have too much invested in me. We're talking highly advanced technology here. We're talking new frontiers of science and medicine, and one of the most brilliant, if twisted, minds of our age. Kawanishi can do almost anything. He can summon the dead. He can provide every comfort (but one) for a creature whose existence is his greatest achievement (so far). The one thing he cannot do is help me to sleep. You no longer require sleep, he keeps telling me. There's no longer any need, because there's no longer any line of demarcation through the middle of your head, separating the halves of your mind. You've no subconscious any more. Lying very still for a couple of hours suffices to rid your body of fatigue poisons. That's all the rest you need or will ever need. Something in our process has seen to that.

LET'S TALK AGAIN, says Barnes, about your sister.

Must we?

What did you accomplish by not talking about her all those years, those decades? The horror and grief piled up inside you until they weighed so much they destroyed your ability to distinguish between the things for which you ought to feel guilt and those over which you had no control whatever.

But I've already told you everything there is to tell about her.

No. Barnes smiles. She has a good smile. In life I probably would have found her attractive. Every time we discuss your sister, something new comes out.

Very well. My sister was fourteen years old when they told her she had bone cancer.

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How did she react?

When they told her what the problem was, how they proposed to deal with it, she went through the usual stages of mind. Shock, disbelief, pathetic outrage. Finally, she came to a renewed faith in God, first in the hope that he would make it better — that vestigial Pentecostal belief in faith healing — then, as the disease continued to devour her, in the belief that he worked in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

How did your parents react?

Our parents prayed and had nervous breakdowns.

And you? How did you react?

It shocked me to see my stable, omnicompetent mother and father, who'd always taken everything in stride, who'd always seemed in control of their lives — and suddenly they were so *useless*. Well, I was just a teenager. What did I know? When the true hopelessness of my sister's situation dawned on me, I wouldn't let myself cry. Doctor, that's where you're suppose to say, Ah hah, if only you had let yourself cry! The two most pathetic words in the English language are If Only. So, I wouldn't cry, and I couldn't pray. I'd already stopped trying to chase down God and declared myself an atheist.

So you had nothing to fall back on. Not parents, not faith.

Nothing. Bear these facts in mind. My sister and I, who should have been close, never were, except for a moment at the end. She was brave to the very end. She'd made her peace with Heaven. The Great Book had been opened to the page bearing her name. God was calling her to Him, and she could but answer. I have no use for her God, but I'm not mocking her faith when I use these terms, which are simply those her religion provided. She believed, and such was her belief that she perceived she had one earthly mission to perform, one duty in this life, before the pain could end and an eternity of bliss became hers. She said to me at the end, "Accept Jesus as your lord. Please don't die a sinner and go to Hell. Promise me you'll accept God's love into your heart and be saved. Promise me that. Please."

And?

I promised.

Ah. Dr. Barnes puts her pen down.

All of these years, I tell her, I have had to live with the terrible knowledge that I knew, even as I made that promise, I couldn't keep it.

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When I left my sister in the intensive care unit, I did go to the small chapel on the first floor of the hospital, and I did get down on my knees, humbled myself in God's holy place. But I was too sickened. Too angry. God, I said, my sister is fifteen years old, fifteen, she's never harmed anybody in her life, she could be the best of us all. If you're truly a just and loving and merciful Lord, the fount of all goodness, then prove it. Stop this horror, please stop it right now, don't let her die this slow ugly obscene utterly undeserved death. Words to that effect, anyway. I wasn't an especially eloquent teenager, only an outraged one trying to make sense of a phenomenon that was supposed to affect, that heretofore had affected, only distant relatives and total strangers.

What happened next?

My sister died that afternoon. I still wouldn't let myself cry. I vowed I'd never, ever, trust God. Two weeks after her death, I scrawled a piece of doggerel on the wall of a public restroom in response to some idiot's broadly penned message that Jesus loved me. I wrote,

> When I'm gone, yes, when I die,
> I'm going up beyond the sky;
> Forget the wings and other things —
> I'll poke Jehovah in the eye!

Dr. Barnes consults her notes for a minute, then says, Now tell me about your son again.

My son was born shortly after midnight one November 12th. His birthday would have been impossible to forget. Ordinarily, which is to say, back when I could still forget things, back when things were ordinary, I'd never been able to remember even the seasons when family members marked the passing of their years. But I'd been born on November 10th, my wife on November 14th, and there was our first child, perfectly placed between us. It would've meant one big birthday party a year for the three of us if certain things were presumed.

Such as?

That my wife and I should remain together, which is to presume a great deal. We were woefully mismatched. It took us years to admit it, even after one of her idiot astrology-minded friends made something of

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the fact that both of us were Scorpios. We made very little money, hardly enough to keep ourselves going, much less to raise a child. My son was born a month ahead of schedule. There were problems with his lungs, so he went straight from the delivery room to the intensive care ward. As I looked through the glass at him, lying there all purply-red and amazingly hairy, I felt everything. Pride. Wonder. Fear. Resentment. Guilt. He died before dawn, November 12th. All of these years, I've had to live with the memory of the floodtide of relief that rushed over me when they told me he was dead. I never cried for him, either. Everything in my life went to pieces after that. I had finally seen the face and knew the name of the real enemy. I had finally grasped the awful secret, the great truth, the key principle, the primary fact, the essence, the immutable underpinning, of Time.

Time? says Barnes. Not God?

Never mind God. Remember, God never quite existed for me, even after my sister died and I declared war on him. But Time — it was Time who's out to get you! Time would rob you blind. Time would punish you whether you deserved it or not. Time would take everything you had that was worth having and leave only sorrow, terror, scars, indignities of every sort — the crap, in short. Then Time would take even that, and take you, too, and in the interim, between the former kind of losses and the latter, ultimate loss, Time would give you just as many or as few hours, days, years as you needed to think about what had happened to you, and about what was going to happen. My wife and I at least had the good sense to go our own ways, though we couldn't resist the urge to inflict a few last slow-healing wounds on each other. I spent the year after the divorce finding out the hard way that I didn't have what it takes to be a successful alcoholic. That seemed to leave me little choice. One evening, an October 15th, I found out the hard way that I did have what it takes to be a successful suicide. I remember the date was January 6th. I remember the water was extremely cold.

Barnes has a strange expression on her handsome face. Perhaps I have at last moved her to pity. She takes out her cell phone and calls Kawanishi.

Nighttime is when the dead come out, and not only the dead. All my losses have been made good, not only the dead but also the misplaced, girls

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and women who went away, boys and men who dropped out of sight, places, pets, everybody, everything. Pride of place, however, goes to the dead, relatives, friends, acquaintances — even if I don't count myself, it appalls me, the number of people I know who have passed away, shuffled off this mortal coil, gone to be with Sartre. I recognize my father's youngest brother, who died of a heart attack, my grandparents and great-grandparents, a cousin of mine who one day picked up the pretty end of a fallen power line, friends, each of them dead too soon — even a guy from my high school. Woodland creatures had been at him for a while when a hunter stumbled upon his shallow unmarked grave.

Early on, I tried pleading with these phantoms to go away and leave me in peace. I tried threats and insults, even tried laying hands upon them, but, of course, you can't reason with or intimidate or hurt shadows. Now I try to annihilate them and myself. I close my eyes and lie very, very still, waiting, hoping, even praying, for sleep.

For if the line separating my conscious and subconscious selves has been erased, if indeed everything is right up here on the surface now, then, below, back down in the depths, what can there be but oblivion?

So, at night, it's crowded where I live, if you call this living, but it could be worse. Usually everyone just hovers at the extremes of my peripheral vision, though occasionally one or two of the other ghosts drift forward and past, cocked at some ludicrous angle in the air and evidently oblivious to me. No one ever speaks to me directly, their voices are barely audible, and I can never tell what they're saying. Tonight I am visited by my grandmother, who undoubtedly has forgotten (undoubtedly she has forgotten, being beyond more forgetting, being in fact dead these many years past) how, when I was a child, she gave me my first instruction about religion by telling me about Heaven. Although I decided that there was a lot to be said for the possession of wings, Heaven didn't fascinate me half so much as the means one used to get there, the thing death. What was death? What? What?

Then, one night, sometime soon after I had begun to hear of death, I lay me down to sleep and dreamed the dream. In the dream, as I stood outside my grandparents' house (a big, warm, secure house, my favorite house during childhood, the center of my universe), great invisible hands suddenly seized me, snatched me high into the air, whizzed me away. I

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realized, somehow, that this was the thing death, that I had died and was on my way to Heaven. I flew high above the world at terrific speed and was not afraid. At last, I slowed in my flight, descended, alighted before a gate of metal bars, entered, found myself in a cobblestone-paved courtyard enclosed by decrepit buildings. A sluggish stream of dirty water bisected the courtyard and passed through the gate. I was alone, and wingless.

I awoke filled with tremendous disappointment and fury.

Not that I blamed my grandmother or thought ill of her in any way. Granny, I say as she drifts by, you were badly misinformed.

But as the night wears on and sleep never comes, my mood sours. My sister's worst fears about the ultimate destination of my immortal soul have been realized. I scream at the walls and shake my fists at the ceiling and at the sky beyond the ceiling, for all the good it does me to shake my fists at either. It doesn't matter whether God doesn't exist or simply isn't moved by my plight. As for Barnes and Kawanishi, when she called him on her cell phone, he arrived so quickly that he could have been waiting hidden, listening all the while, just outside the door.

Look, Barnes told him, still with that strange expression on her face, and he approached me, peered into my face.

Yes, he said happily, the tear ducts work perfectly.

For Nancy Ann Utley (1950-1966)
and
Jon Christopher Utley (1971).

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Geoff Ryman's latest novel, The King's Last Song, *is due out in the US any day now. Of "Days of Wonder," Mr. Ryman says this story could not have taken this form without the help of Anil Menon who suggested that artificial chromosomes could be the vehicle for the "ark" genes. Artificial chromosomes date from the early 1980s when a yeast chromosome was constructed from existing genetic material. For a useful introduction to artificial chromosomes see "Genomics and Gene Therapy: Artificial Chromosomes Coming to Life," Huntington F. Willard,* Science *magazine, 17 November 2000. Available online at* www.sciencemag.org.

Days of Wonder

By Geoff Ryman

LEVEZA WAS THE WRONG name for her; she was big and strong, not light. Her bulk made her seem both male and female; her shoulders were broad but so were her hips and breasts.

She had beautiful eyes, round and black, and she was thoughtful; her heavy jaws would grind round and round as if imitating the continual motion of her mind. She always looked as if she were listening to something distant, faraway.

Like many large people, Leveza was easily embarrassed. Her mane would bristle up across the top of her head and down her spine. She was strong and soft all at once, and kind. I liked talking to her; her voice was so high and gentle; though her every gesture was blurting and forlorn.

But that voice when it went social! If Leveza saw a Cat crouching in the grass, her whinnying was sudden, fierce and irresistible. All of us would pirouette into a panic at once. Her cry was infallible.

So she was an *afrirador*, one of our sharpshooters, always reared up onto hind quarters to keep watch, always carrying a rifle, always herself

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a target. My big brave friend. Her rear buttocks grew ever more heavy from constant standing. She could walk upright like an Ancestor for a whole day. Her pelt was beautiful, her best feature, a glossy deep chestnut, no errant Ancestor reds. As rich and deep as the soil under the endless savannah.

We were groom-mates in our days of wonder.

I would brush her, and her hide would twitch with pleasure. She would stretch with it, as it were taffy to be pulled. We tried on earrings, or tied bows into manes, or corn-rowed them into long braids. But Leveza never rested long with simple pleasures or things easily understood.

Even young, before bearing age, she was serious and adult. I remember her as a filly, slumped at the feet of the stallions as they smoked their pipes, played checkers, and talked about what they would do if they knew how to make electricity.

Leveza would say that we could make turning blades to circulate air; we could pump water to irrigate grass. We could boil water, or make heat to dry and store cud cakes. The old men would chuckle to hear her dreaming.

I thought it was a pointless game, but Leveza could play it better than anyone, seeing further and deeper into her own inherited head. Her groom-sister Ventoo always teased her, "Leveza, what are you fabricating now?"

We all knew that stuff. I knew oh so clearly, how to wrap thin metal round and round a pivot and with electricity, make it spin. But who could be bothered? I loved to run. All of us foals would suddenly sprint through long grass to make the ground thunder, to raise up the sweet smells of herbs, and to test our strength. We had fire in our loins and we wanted to gallop all the way to the sun. Leveza pondered.

She didn't like it when her first heat came. The immature bucks would hee-haw at her and pull back their feeling lips to display their great white plates of teeth. When older men bumped her buttocks with their heads, she would give a little backward kick, and if they tried to mount her, she walked out from under them. And woe betide any low-grade drifter who presumed that Leveza's lack of status meant she was grateful for attention. She would send the poor bag of bones rattling through the long grass. The babysquirrels clutched their sides and laughed. "Young NeverLove wins again."

But I knew. It was not a lack of love that made my groom-mate so

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careful and reserved. It was an abundance of love, a surfeit of it, more than our kind is meant to have, can afford to have, for we live on the pampas and our cousins eat us.

Love came upon Leveza on some warm night, the moon like bedtime milk. She would not have settled for a quick bump with a reeking male just because the air wavered with hot hormones. I think it would have been the reflection of milklight in black eyes, a gentle ruffling of upper lip, perhaps a long and puzzled chat about the nature of this life and its consequences.

We are not meant to love. We are meant to mate, stand side by side for warmth for a short time afterward, and then forget. *I wonder who fathered this one?*

Leveza knew and would never forget. She never said his name, but most of us knew who he was. I sometimes caught her looking toward the circle of the Great Men, her eyes full of gentleness. They would gallop about at headball, or talk seriously about axle grease. None of them looked her way, but she would be smiling with a gentle glowing love, her eyes fixed on one of them as steadily as the moon.

One night, she tugged at my mane. "Akwa, I am going to sprog," she said, with a wrench of a smile at the absurdity of such a thing.

"Oh! Oh Leveza, that's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me, how did this happen?"

She ronfled in amusement, a long ruffling snort. "In the usual way, my friend."

"No, but...oh you know! I have seen you with no one."

She went still. "Of course not."

"Do you know which one?"

Her whole face was in milklight. "Yes. Oh yes."

Leveza was both further back toward an Ancestor than anyone I ever met, and furthest forward toward the beasts. Even then it was as if she was pulled in two directions, Earth and stars. The night around us would sigh with multiple couplings. I was caught up in the season. Sex was like a river, washing all around us. I was a young mare then, I can tell you, wide of haunch, slim of ankle. I plucked my way through the grass as if it were the strings of a harp. All the highest-rankers would come and snuffle me, and I surprised myself. Oh! I was a pushover. One after another after another.

I would come back feeling like a pasture grazed flat; and she would be

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lumped out on the ground, content and ready to welcome me. I nuzzled her ear, which flicked me like I was a fly, and I would lay my head on her buttock to sleep.

"You are a strange one," I would murmur. "But you will be kind to my babes. We will have a lovely house." I knew she would love my babies as her own.

THAT YEAR the dry season did not come.

It did go cooler, the afternoon downpours were fewer, but the grass did not go gray. There was dew when we got up, sparkling and cold with our morning mouthfuls. Some rain came at nighttime in short, soft caresses rather than pummeling on our pavilion roofs. I remember screens pulled down, the smell of grass, and warm breath of a groom-mate against my haunches.

"I'm preggers too," I said some weeks later and giggled, thrilled and full of butterflies. I was young, eh? In my fourth year. I could feel my baby nudge. Leveza and I giggled together under our shawls.

It did not go sharply cold. No grass-frost made our teeth ache. We waited for the triggering, but it did not come.

"Strangest year I can remember," said the old women. They were grateful, for migrations were when they were eaten.

That year! We made porridge for the toothless. We groomed and groomed, beads and bows and necklaces and shawls and beautiful grass hats. Leveza loved it when I made up songs; the first, middle and last word of every line would rhyme. She'd snort and shake her mane and say "How did you do that; that's so clever!"

We would stroke each other's stomachs as our nipples swelled. Leveza hated hers; they were particularly large like aubergines. "Uh. They're gross. Nobody told me they wobble in the way of everything." They ached to give milk; early in her pregnancy they started to seep. There was a scrum of baby squirrels around her every morning. Business-like, she sniffed and let them suckle. "When my baby comes, you'll have to wait your turn." The days and nights came and went like the beating of birdlike wings. She got a bit bigger, but never too big to stand guard.

Leveza gave birth early, after only nine months.

It was midwinter, in dark Fehveroo when no one was ready. Leveza

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pushed her neck up against my mouth for comfort. When I woke she said, "Get Grama for me." Grama was a high-ranking midwife.

I was stunned. She could not be due yet. The midwives had stored no oils or bark-water. I ran to Grama, woke her, worried her. I hoofed the air in panic. "Why is this happening now? What's wrong?"

By the time we got back, Leveza had delivered. Just one push and the babe had arrived, a little bundle of water and skin and grease on the ground behind her rear quarters.

The babe was tiny, as long as a shin, palomino, and covered in soft orange down so light that he looked hairless. No jaw at all. How would he grind grass? Limbs all in soft folds like clouds. Grama said nothing, but held up his feet for me to see. The forelegs had no hoof-buds at all, just fingers; and his hind feet were great soft mitts. Not quite a freak, streamlined and beautiful in a way. But fragile, defenseless, and nothing that would help Leveza climb the hierarchy. It was the most Ancestral child I had ever seen.

Grama set to licking him clean. I looked at the poor babe's face. I could see his hide through the sparse hair on his cheeks. "Hello," I said. "I'm your Groom-Mummy. Your name is Kaway. Yes it is. You are Kaway."

A blank. He couldn't talk. He could hardly move.

I had to pick him up with my hands. There was no question of using my mouth; there was no pelt to grip. I settled the babe next to Leveza. Her face shone love down on him. "He's beautiful as he is."

Grama jerked her head toward the partition; we went outside to talk. "I've heard of such births; they happen sometimes. The inheritances come together like cards shuffling. He won't learn to talk until he's two. He won't walk until then, either. He won't really be mobile until three or four."

"Four!" I thought of all those migrations.

Grama shrugged. "They can live long, if they make it past infancy. Maybe fifty years."

I was going to ask where they were now, and then I realized. They don't linger in this world, these soft sweet angelic things.

They get eaten.

My little Choova was born two months later. I hated childbirth. I thought I would be good at it, but I thrashed and stomped and hee-hawed

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like a male in season. *I will never do this again!* I promised. I didn't think then that the promise would come true.

"Come on, babe, come on my darling," Leveza said, butting me with her nose as if herding a filly. "It will be over soon, just keep pushing."

Grama had become a friend; I think she saw value in Leveza's mindful way of doing things. "Listen to your family," she told me.

My firstborn finally bedraggled her way out, tawny, knobbly, shivering and thin, pulled by Grama. Leveza scooped my baby up, licked her clean, breathed into her, and then dandled her in front of my face. "This is your beautiful mother." Choova looked at me with intelligent love and grinned.

Grama whinnied the cry that triggers *Happy Birth*! Some of our friends trotted up to see my beautiful babe, stuck their heads through the curtains. They tossed their heads, chortled and nibbled the back of her neck.

"Come on, little one. Stand! Stand!" This is what the ladies had come to see. Leveza propped Choova up on her frail, awkward, heartbreaking legs, and walked her toward me. My baby stumbled forward and collapsed like a pile of sticks, into the sheltering bay of my stomach.

Leveza lowered Kaway in front of Choova's nostrils. "And this is your little groom-brother Kaway."

"Kaway," Choova said.

Our family numbered four.

We did not migrate for one whole year. The colts and fillies would skitter unsteadily across the grass, safe from predators. The old folk sunned themselves on the grass and gossiped. High summer came back with sweeping curtains of rain. Then the days shortened; things cooled and dried.

Water started to come out of the wells muddy; we filtered it. The grass started to go crisp. There was perhaps a month or two of moisture left in the ground. Our children neared the end of their first year, worthy of the name foal.

Except for Leveza's. Kaway lay there like an egg after all these months. He could just about move his eyes. Almost absurdly, Leveza loved him as if he were whole and well.

"You are a miracle," she said to Kaway. People called him the Lump.

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She would look at him, her face all dim with love, and she would say her fabricated things. She would look at me rapt with wonder.

"What if he knows what the Ancestors knew? We know about cogs and gears and motors and circuits. What if Kaway is born knowing about electricity? About medicine and machines? What he might tell us!"

She told him stories and the stories went like this.

The Ancestors so loved the animals that when the world was dying, they took them into themselves. They made extra seeds for them, hidden away in their own to carry us safely inside themselves, all the animals they most loved.

The sickness came, and the only way for them to escape was to let the seeds grow. And so we flowered out of them; the sickness was strong, and they disappeared.

Leveza looked down at her little ancestral lump. Some of us would have left such a burden out on the plain for the Cats or the Dogs or the scavenging oroobos. But not Leveza. She could carry anything.

I think Leveza loved everyone. Everyone, in this devouring world. And that's why what happened, happened.

The pampas near the camp went bald in patches, where the old and weak had overgrazed it. Without realizing, we began to prepare.

The babysquirrels gathered metal nuts. The bugs in their tummies made them from rust in the ground. The old uncles would smelt them for knives, rifle barrels, and bullets. Leveza asked them to make some rods.

She heated them and bent them backward and Grama looked at them and asked, "What kind of rifle is that going to make, one that shoots backward?"

"It's for Kaway," Leveza replied. She cut off her mane for fabric. I cut mine as well, and to our surprise, so did Grama.

Leveza wove a saddle for her back, so the baby could ride.

Once Grama had always played the superior high-ranker, bossy and full of herself. "Oh Leveza how clever. What a good idea." And then, "I'm sorry what I said, earlier." She slipped Leveza's inert mushroom of a boy into the saddle.

Grama had become kind.

Grama being respectful about Leveza and Kaway set a fashion for appreciating who my groom-mate was. Nobody asked me anymore why

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on Earth I was with her. When the Head Man Fortchee began talking regularly to her about migration defenses, a wave of gossip convulsed the herd. Could Leveza become the Head Mare? Was the Lump really Fortchee's son?

"She's always been so smart, so brave," said Ventoo.

"More like a man," said Lindalfa, with a wrench of a smile.

ONE MORNING, the Head Man whinnied over and over and trod the air with his forelegs.

Triggered.

Migration.

We took down the pavilions and the windbreaks and stacked the grass-leaf panels in carts. We loaded all our tools and pipes and balls and blankets, and most precious of all, the caked and blackened foundries. The camp's babysquirrels lined up, and chattered goodbye to us, as if they really cared. Everyone nurtured the squirrels, and used them as they use us; even Cats will never eat them.

It started out a fine migration. Oats lined the length of the trail. As we ate, we scattered oat seed behind us, to replace it. Shit, oat seed, and inside the shit, flakes of plastic our bellies made, but there were no squirrels to gather it.

It did not rain, but the watering holes and rivers stayed full. It was sunny but not so hot that flies tormented us.

In bad years your hide never stops twitching because you can't escape the stench of Cat piss left to dry on the ground. That year the ground had been washed and the air was calm and sweet.

We saw no Cats. Dogs, we saw Dogs, but fat and jolly Dogs stuffed to the brim with quail and partridge which Cats don't eat. "Lovely weather!" the Dogs called to us, tongues hanging out, grins wide, and we whinnied back, partly in relief. We can see off Dogs, except when they come in packs.

Leveza walked upright the whole time, gun at the ready, Kaway strapped to her back.

"Leveza," I said, "You'll break your back! Use your palmhoofs!"

She grunted. "Any Cat comes near our babies, and it will be one sorry Cat!"

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"What Cats? We've seen none."

"They depend on the migrations. We've missed one. They will be very, very hungry."

Our first attack came the next day. I thought it had started to rain; there was just a hissing in the grass, and I turned and I saw old Alez; I saw her eyes rimmed with white, the terror stare. I didn't even see the four Cats that gripped her legs.

Fortchee brayed a squealing sound of panic. Whoosh, we all took off. I jumped into a gallop, I can tell you, no control or thought; I was away; all I wanted was the rush of grass under my hands.

Then I heard a shot and I turned back and I saw Leveza, all alone, standing up, rifle leveled. A Cat was spinning away from Alez, as if it were a spring-pasture caper. The other Cats stared. Leveza fired again once more and they flickered like fire and were gone. Leveza flung herself flat onto the grass just before a crackling like tindersticks come out of the long grass.

The Cats had guns too.

Running battle.

"Down down!" I shouted to the foals. I galloped toward them. "Just! Get! Flat!" I jumped on top them, ramming them down into the dirt. They wailed in panic and fear. "Get off me! Get off me!" My little Choova started to cry. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

I was all teeth. "What did we tell you about an attack? You run and when the gunfire starts you flatten. What did I say! What did I say?"

Gunsmoke drifted; the dry grass sparkled with shot, our nostrils shivered from the smell of burning.

Cats prefer to pounce first, get one of us down, and have the rest of us gallop away. They know if they fire first, they're more likely to be shot themselves.

The fire from our women was fierce, determined, and constant. We soon realized that the only gunfire we heard was our own and that the Cats had slunk away.

The children still wailed, faces crumpled, tears streaming. Their crying just made us grumpy. Well, we all thought, it's time they learned. "You stupid children. What did you think this was, a game?"

Grama was as hard as any granny. "Do you want to be torn to pieces

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and me have to watch it happen? Do you think you can say to a Cat very nicely please don't eat me and that will stop them?"

Leveza was helping Alez to stand. Her old groom-mother's legs kept giving way, and she was grinning a wide rictus grin. She looked idiotic.

"Come on love, that's it." Leveza eased Alez toward Pronto's cart.

"What are you doing?" Pronto said, glaring at her.

"She's in no fit state to walk."

"You mean, I'm supposed to haul her?"

"I know you'd much rather leave her to be eaten, but no thanks, not just this once."

Somehow, more like a goat than a Horse, Alez nipped up into the wagon. Leveza strode back toward us, still on her hind legs.

The children shivered and sobbed. Leveza strode up to us. And then did something new.

"Aw, babies," she said, in a stricken tone I had never heard before. She dropped down on four haunches next to them. "Oh darlings!" She caressed their backs, laying her jaw on the napes of their necks. "It shouldn't be like this, I know. It is terrible, I know. But we are the only thing they have to eat."

"Mummy shouted at me! She was mean."

"That's because Mummy was so worried and so frightened for you. She was scared because you didn't know what it was and didn't know what to do. Mummy was so frightened that she would lose you."

"The Cats eat us!"

"And the crocodiles in the river. And there are wolves, a kind of Dog. We don't get many here, they are on the edge of the snows in the forests. Here, we get the Cats."

Leveza pulled back their manes and breathed into their nostrils. "It shouldn't be like this."

Should or shouldn't, we thought, that's how it is. Why waste energy wishing it wasn't?

We'd forgotten, you see, that it was a choice, a choice that in the end was ours. Not my Leveza.

The Head Man came up, and his voice was also gentle with the colts and fillies. "Come on, kids. The Cats will be back. We need to move away from here."

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He had to whinny to get us moving; he even back-kicked the reluctant Pronto. Alez sat up in the cart looking cross-eyed and beside herself with delight at being carried.

"Store and dry cud," Fortchee told us.

Cudcakes. How I hate cudcakes. You chew them and spit them out on the carts to dry and you always think you'll remember where yours are and you always end up eating someone else's mash of grass and spit.

Leveza walked next to the Head Man, looking at maps, murmuring and tossing her mane toward the east. I saw them make up their minds about something.

I even felt a little tail-flick of jealousy. When she came back, I said a bit sharply. "What was that all about?"

Leveza sounded almost pleased. "Don't tell the others. We're being stalked."

"What?"

"Must be slim pickings. The Cats have left their camp. They've got their cubs with them. They're following us." She sighed, her eyes on the horizon. "It's a nuisance. They think they can herd us. There'll be some kind of trap set ahead, so we've decided to change our route."

We turned directly east. The ground started to rise, toward the hills, where an age-old trail goes through a pass. Rocks began to break through a mat of thick grasses. The slope steepened, and each of the carts needed two big men to haul it up.

The trail followed valleys between high rough humps of ground, dovetailing with small streams cut deeply into the grass. We could hear the water, like thousands of tongues lapping on stone. The most important thing on a migration is to get enough to drink. The water in the streams was delicious, cold and tasting of rocks, not mud.

My name means water, but I think I must taste of mud.

We found ourselves in a new world, looking out on waves of earth, rising and falling and going blue in the distance. On the top of distant ridge a huge rock stuck out, with a rounded dome like a skull.

Fortchee announced. "We need to make that rock by evening." It was already early afternoon, and everyone groaned.

"Or you face the Cats out here on open ground," he said.

"Come on, you're wasting breath," said Leveza and strode on.

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The ground was strange; a deep rich black smelling deliciously of grass and leaves, and it thunked underfoot with a hollow sound like a drum. We grazed as we marched, tearing up the grass, and pulling up with it mouthfuls of soil, good to eat but harsh, hard to digest. It made us fart, pungently, and in each others faces as we marched. "No need for firelighters!" the old women giggled.

In places the trail had washed away, leaving tumbles of boulders that the carts would creak up and over, dropping down on the other side with a worrying crash. Leveza stomped on, still on two legs, gun ready. She would spring up rocks, heel-hooves clattering and skittering on stone. Sure-footed she wasn't. She did not hop nimbly, but she was relentless.

"They're still here," she muttered to me. All of us wanted our afternoon kip, but Fortchee wouldn't let us. The sun dropped, the shadows lengthened. Everything glowed orange. This triggered fear — low light means you must find safe camping. We snorted, and grew anxious.

Down one hill and up the other: it was sunset, the worst time for us, when we arrived at the skull rock. We don't like stone either.

"We sleep up there," Fortchee said. He had a fight on his hands. We had never heard of such a thing.

"What, climb up that? We'll split our hooves. Or tear our fingers," said Ventoo.

"And leave everything behind in the wagons?" yelped one of the men.

"It'll be windy and cold."

Fortchee tossed his head. "We'll keep each other warm."

"We'll fall off...."

"Don't be a load of squirrels," said Leveza. She went to a cart, picked up a bag of tools, and started to climb.

Fortchee amplified, "Take ammo, all the guns."

"What about the foundries?"

He sighed. "We'll need to leave those."

By some miracle, the dome had a worn hole in the top full of rainwater and we drank. We had our kip, but the Head Man wouldn't let us go down to graze. It got dark and we had another sleep, two hours or more. But you can't sleep all night.

I was woken up by a stench of Cat that seemed to shriek in my nostrils. I heard Leveza sounding annoyed. "Tuh!" she said, "Dear oh

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dear!" Louder than a danger call — bam! — a gun blast, followed by the yelp of a Cat. Then the other *afriradors* opened fire. The children whinnied in terror. Peering down into milklight I could see a heaving tide of Cat pulling back from the rock. They even made a sound like water, the scratching of claws on stone.

"What fun," said Leveza.

I heard Grama trying not to giggle. Safety and strength came off Leveza's hide like a scent.

She turned to Fortchee. "Do you think we should go now or wait here?"

"Well, we can't wait until after sunrise, that'll slow us down too much. Now."

Leveza really was acting like Head Mare, and there had not been one of those in a while. She was climbing into the highest status. Not altogether hindered by having, if I may say so, a high-class groom-mate.

The *afriradors* sent out continual shots to drive back the last of the Cats. Then we skittered down the face of the rock back toward the wagons.

At the base of the cliff, a Cat lay in a pool of blood, purring, eyes closed as if asleep. Lindalfa scream-whinnied in horror and clattered backward. The Cat rumbled but did not stir.

Muttering, fearful, we were all pushed back by Cat-stench; we twitched and began to circle just before panic.

Leveza leaned in close to stare.

"Love, come away," I said. I picked my way forward, ready to grab her neck and pull her back if the thing lunged. I saw its face in milklight.

I'd never seen a Cat up close before.

The thing that struck me was that she was handsome. It was a finely formed face, despite the short muzzle, with a divided upper lip which seemed almost to smile, the mouthful of fangs sheathed. The Cat's expression looked simply sad, as if she were asking Life itself one last question.

Leveza sighed and said, "Poor heart."

The beast moaned, a low miserable sound that shook the earth. "You...need...predators."

"Like cat-shit we do," said Leveza, and stood up and back. "Come

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on!" she called to the rest of us, as if we were the ones who had been laggard.

THE CATS were clever. They had pulled out far ahead of us so we had no idea when they would attack again. Our hooves slipped on the rocks. Leveza went all hearty on us. "Goats do this sort of thing. They have hooves too."

"They're cloven," said one of the bucks.

"Nearly cousins," sniffed Leveza. I think the light, the air, and the view so far above the plain exhilarated her. It depressed me. I wanted to be down there where it was flat and you could run and it was full of grass. The men hauling the wagons never stopped frothing, eyes edged white. They were trapped in yokes and that made them easy prey.

We hated being strung out along the narrow trail, and kept hanging back so we could gather together in clumps. She would stomp on ahead and stomp on back. "Come on, everyone, while it's still dark."

"We're just waiting for the others," quailed Lindalfa.

"No room for the others, love, not on this path."

Lindalfa sounded harassed. "Well, I don't like being exposed like this."

"No, you'd far rather have all your friends around you to be eaten first." It was a terrible thing to say, but absolutely true. Some of us laughed.

Sunrise came, the huge white sky contrasting too much with the silhouetted earth so that we could see nothing. We waited it out in a defensive group, carts around us. As soon as the sun rose high enough, Leveza triggered us to march. Not Fortchee. She urged us on and got us moving, and went ahead to scout. I learned something new about my groom-mate: the most loyal and loving of us was also the one who could most stand being alone.

She stalked on ahead, and I remember seeing the Lump sitting placidly on her back, about as intelligent as a cudcake.

A high wind stroked the grass in waves. Beautiful clouds were piled up overhead, full of wheeling birds, scavengers who were neither hunters nor victims. They knew nothing of ancestors or even speech.

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Then we heard over the brow of a hill the snarl of Cats who have gone for the kill and no longer need stealth.

Leveza. Ahead. Alone.

"Gotcha!" they roared in thunder-voices.

We heard gunfire, just a snapping like a twig, and a Cat yelp, and then more gunfire and after that a heartfelt wail that could not have come from a Cat, a long hideous keening, more like that of a bird.

Fortchee broke into a lurching, struggling gallop. He triggered me and I jumped forward into a gallop too, slipping on rocks, heaving my way up the slope. It was like a nightmare where something keeps pulling you back. I heaved myself up onto the summit and saw Leveza, sitting on the ground, Fortchee stretching down to breathe into her ears.

She was staring ahead. Fortchee looked up at me with such sadness.

Before he could speak, Leveza turned her heavy jaws, her great snout toward the sky and mourned, whinnying now a note for the dead.

"They got the Lump," said the Head Man, and turned and rubbed her shoulders. Her saddle-pack was torn. The baby was gone. Leveza keened, rocking from side to side, her lips forming a circle, the sound coming from far back and down her throat.

"Leveza," said Fortchee, looking forlornly at me.

"Leveza," I agreed, for we knew that she would not forget Kaway soon.

The rest of us, we lose a child, we have another next year; we don't think about it; we can't afford to. We're not strong enough. They die, child after child, and the old beloved aunties, or the wise old men who can no longer leap away. We can hear them being eaten. "Remember me! I love you!" they call to us, heartbroken to be leaving life and leaving us. But we have to forget them.

So we go brittle and shallow, sweet and frightened, smart but dishonest.

Not Leveza. She suddenly snarled, snatched up her rifle, rocked to her feet, and galloped off, after the Cats.

"She can't think that she can get him back!" I said.

"I don't know what she can think," said Fortchee.

The others joined us and we all stood haunches pressed together. None of us went to help, not even me, her beloved groom-mate. You do not chase prides of Cats to rescue anyone. You accept that they have been taken.

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We heard distant shots, and the yelping of Cats. We heard hooves.

"She's coming back," whispered Grama and glanced at me. It was as if the hills themselves had stood up to stretch to see if things looked any different. A Horse had been hunting Cats.

Leveza appeared again at the top of the hill and for a moment I thought she had wrought a miracle, for her child dangled from her mouth.

Then I saw the way she swayed when she walked, the dragging of her hooves. She baby-carried a tiny torn head and red bones hanging together by tendons and scraps of skin. Suddenly she just sat on the ground and renewed her wailing. She arched her head round and looked down at herself in despair. Her breasts were seeping milk.

She tried to make the bones drink. She pushed the fragments of child onto her dugs. I cantered to her, lost my footing, and collapsed next to her. "Leveza. Love. Let him be."

She shouted up into my face with unseeing eyes. "What am I supposed to do with him?"

"Oh Leveza," I started to weep for her. "You feel things too much."

"I'm not leaving him!"

You're supposed to walk away. You're supposed to leave them to the birds and then to the sun and then to the rains until they wash back into the earth.

To come again as grass. We eat our grandmothers, in the grass. It shows acceptance, good will toward the world to forget quickly.

Leveza began to tear at the thin pelt of ground that covered the rocks. She gouged at it, skinning her forefingers, broke open the sod, and peeled it back. She laid the scraps on the bare rock, and gently covered what was left of him as if with a blanket. She tucked him in and began to sing a soft milklight song to him.

It simply was not bearable. If a child dies through sickness you take it away from camp, and let the birds and insects get to it. Then later you dance on the bones, to break them up into dust to show scorn for the body and the heart to accept fate.

The Head Man came back, and bumped her with his snout. "Up, Leveza. We must keep moving."

Leveza stroked the ground. "Good night Kaway. Sleep Kaway. Grow like a seed. Become beautiful Kaway grass."

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We muttered and murmured. We'd all lost people we love like that. Why should she keen and carry on, why should she be different?

"I know it's hard," said Lindalfa. Unspoken was the "but."

Love can't be that special. Love must not cost that much. You'll learn, Leveza, I thought, like all the others. You'll finally learn.

I was looking down at her in some kind of triumph, proved right, when Leveza stood up, and turned everything upside down again.

She shook the tears out of her eyes and then walked away from me, shouldering past Fortchee as if he were an encumbrance. Tamely we trooped after her. She went to a wagon and reloaded her gun. She started to troop back down the hill in the direction of the rock.

"That's the wrong way, isn't it?"

"What's she doing?"

Fortchee called after her, and when she didn't answer, he looked deeply at me and said. "Follow her."

I whinnied for her to wait and started to trot down the hill.

Her determined stomp became a canter, then, explosively a kind of leaping, runaway gallop, thundering slipshod over stones and grass, threatening to break a leg. I chortled the slow-down cry but that checked her only for a moment. At the foot of the Rock she slid to a halt, raising dust.

She leveled her gun at the head of the wounded Cat. A light breeze seemed to blow her words to me up the slope. "Why do we need predators?"

The Cat groaned, its eyes still shut. "The Ancestors destroyed the world."

I reached them. "Leveza, come away," I nickered.

The Cat swallowed heavily. "They killed predators." All her words seemed to start with a growl.

Leveza went very still, I flanked her, and kept saying, leave her, come away. Suddenly she pushed the gun at me. "Shoot her if she moves."

I hated guns. I thought they would explode in my hands, or knock me backward. I knew carrying a gun made you a target. I didn't want the gun; I wanted to get us back to safety. I whinnied in fear.

She pushed on back up the hill, "I'm coming back," she said over her shoulder. I was alone with a Cat.

"Just kill me," said the Cat. The air was black with her blood;

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everything in me buzzed and went numb. Overhead the scavengers spiraled and I was sure at any moment other Cats would come. Climb the Rock! I told myself, but I couldn't move. I looked up at the trail.

Finally, finally Leveza came back with another gun and a coil of rope.

"Don't you ever do that to me again!" I sobbed.

She looked ferocious, her mane bristling, teeth smiling to bite out flesh. "You want to live, you put up with this," she said. I thought she said it to me.

"What are you fabricating now?" I hated her then, always having to surprise.

She bound the Cat's front paws together, and then the back, and then tied all four limbs to the animal's trunk. Leveza seized the mouth; I squealed and she began to wrap the snout round and round with rope. Blood seeped in woven patterns through the cord. The Cat groaned and rolled her eyes.

Then, oh then, Leveza sat on the ground and rolled the Cat onto her own back. She reached round and turned it so that it was folded sideways over her. Then she turned to me. "I don't suppose there's any chance of you giving me a hand?"

I said nothing. All of this was so unheard of that it triggered nothing, not even fear.

Slowly, forelegs first, Leveza stood up under the weight of the Cat. The Cat growled and dug in those great claws, but that just served to hold her in place. Burdened, Leveza began to climb the hill, her back beginning to streak with blood. I looked up. Everyone was bunched together on the brow of the ridge. I had no words, I forgot all words. I just climbed.

As we drew near, the entire herd, every last one of them including her groom-mother Alez formed a wall of lowered heads. *Go back, get away.* I think it was for the Cat, but it felt as if it were for us. Leveza kept coming. Hides started to twitch from the smell of Cat blood carried on the wind. Leveza ignored them and plodded on. The men had also come back with the carts. Old Pronto in harness tried to move sideways in panic and couldn't.

"Think," she told him. "For a change."

He whinnied and danced in place on the verge of bolting with one of our main wagons.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" She plucked out the pin of his yoke with her

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teeth and he darted away, the yoke still on his shoulders. He trotted to a halt, and then stood there looking sheepish.

Leveza rolled the Cat onto the wagon, tools clanking under the body. Brisk and business-like, she picked up pliers, and began to pull out, one by one, all of the Cat's claws.

The poor beast groaned, roared, and shivered, rocking her head and trying to bite despite her jaws being tied shut. The Cat flexed her bloodied hands and feet but she no longer had claws. It seemed to take forever as the air whispered about us.

Undirected, all of us just stared.

When it was over, the Cat lay flat, panting. Leveza then took more rope, tied it tight 'round the predator's neck, lashing the other end to the yoke fittings. She then unwound the rope from her jaws. The Cat roared and rocked in place; her huge green fangs smelling of blood. Leveza took a hammer and chisel, and began to break all the Cat's teeth.

Fortchee stepped forward. "Leveza. Stop. This is cruel."

"But necessary or she'll eat us."

"Why are you doing this? It won't bring Kaway back."

She turned and looked at him, the half wheel of her lower jaw swollen. "To learn from her."

"Learn what?"

"What she knows."

"We have to get moving," said the Head Man.

"Exactly," she said, with flat certainty. "That's why she's in the cart."

"You're taking her with us?" Everything on Fortchee bristled, from his mane to his handsome goatee.

She stood there, and I think I remember her smiling. "You won't be able to stop me."

The entire herd made a noise in unison, a kind of horrified, wondering sigh.

She turned to me with airy unconcern and asked. "Do you think you could get me the yoke?"

Pronto tossed it at her with his head. "Here, have it, demented woman!"

I started to weep. "Leveza, this won't bring him back. Come, love, let it be, leave her alone and let's go."

She looked at me with pity. "Poor Akwa."

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Leveza pulled the wagon herself. Women are supposed to carry guns; men haul the wagon, two of them together if it is uphill.

I tried to walk with her. No one else could bear to go near the prickling stench of Cat. It made me weep and cough. "I can't stay."

"It's all right, love," she said. "Go to the others, you'll feel safer."

"You'll be alone with that thing."

"She's preoccupied."

Unable to imagine what else to do, I left.

We migrated on. All through that long day, Fortchee did not let us sleep, and we could sometimes hear Leveza behind us, tormenting the poor animal with questions.

"No," we heard her shout. "It's not instinct. You can choose not to eat other people!"

The Cat roared and groaned. "Sometimes there is nothing else to eat! Do you want us to let our children die?"

Leveza roared back. "Why take my baby then? There was no...." She whinnied loud in horror, and snorted in fury. "There was no meat on him!"

The Cat groaned. She was talking, but we couldn't hear what she said. Leveza went silent, plodding on alone, listening to the Cat. She fell far behind even the rear guard of *afriradors* who were supposed to protect stragglers. Already it was slightly as though she did not exist.

The light settled low and orange, the shadows grew long. I kept craning behind us but by then I could neither see nor hear Leveza.

"They'll attack her! She'll be taken!" I nickered constantly to Grama.

She laid her head on my neck as we walked. "If anyone can stand alone against Cats, it's her."

We found no outcropping. On top of a hill with a good view all around, Fortchee lifted himself up and trod the air, whinnying. The men in the carts turned left and circled. "Windbreaks!" called the Head Man. We all began to unload windbreak timbers, to slot down the sides of the carts, to make a fortress. I kept looking back for Leveza.

Finally she appeared in the smoky dusk hauling the Cat. Froth had dried on her neck. She looked exhausted; her head dipped as if chastened.

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Fortchee stepped in front of her. "You can't come into the circle with that cart."

She halted. Burrs and bracken had got tangled in her mane. She stared at the ground. "She's tied up. She's very weak."

Fortchee snorted in anger and pawed the dirt. "Do you think anybody could sleep with a Cat stinking up the inside of the circle?"

She paused, blinked. "She says the other Cats will kill her."

"Let them!" said Fortchee.

Without answering, Leveza turned and hauled the cart away from the camp. Fortchee froze, looked at her, and then said, "Akwa, see to your groom-mate."

Something in that made Grama snort, and she came with me. As we walked toward the carts, we pressed together the whole length of our bodies from shoulder to haunch for comfort.

Grama said, "She's reliving what happened to Grassa."

"Grassa?"

"Her mother. She saw her eaten, remember?"

"Oh yes, sorry." I did the giggle, the giggle you give to excuse forgetting, the forgetting of the dead out of embarrassment and the need to keep things light. "Anyway," I said, "you made things hard enough for her when she was young."

Grama hung her head. "I know." Grama had tried to bully Leveza until she'd head-butted her, though two years younger.

It's not good to remember.

Leveza had already climbed up into the cart, without having watered or grazed. Her eyes flicked back and forth between me and Grama. "Grama, of course, how sensible. Here." She threw something at me and without thinking I caught it in my mouth. It was a bullet, thick with Cat blood and I spat it out.

"Fortchee wouldn't thank you for that. He's always telling us to save metal. Grama, love, do you think you could bring us bark-water, pain killers, thread?"

Grama's hide twitched, but she said, "Yes, of course."

Leveza reached around and tossed her a gun. "Watch yourself. I'll keep my gun ready too."

Grama picked up the bullet, then trotted back through the dusk. I felt

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undefended but I could not get up into the wagon with that thing. Leveza stood on hindquarters, scanning the camp, her gun leveled. As Grama came back with a pack, Leveza's nostrils moved as if about to speak.

"They're here," she said.

Grama clambered up into the cart. I couldn't see the Cat behind the sideboards, but I could see Grama's eyes flare open, her mane bristle. Even so, she settled on her rear haunches and began to work, dabbing the wounds. I could hear the Cat groan, deep enough to shake the timber of the cart.

Leveza's tail began to flick. I could smell it now: Cat all around us, scent blowing up the hillside like ribbons. The sunset was full of fire, clouds the color of flowers. Calmly Grama sewed the wound. Leveza eased herself down, eyes still on the pasture, to feel if Grama's gun was loaded.

"Her name's Mai, by the way," said Leveza. Mai meant Mother in both tongues.

The Cat made a noise like *Rergurduh*, Rigadoo. Thanks.

Leveza nickered a gentle safety call to me. I jumped forward, and then stopped. The smell of Cat was a wall.

"Get up into the cart," said Leveza in a slow mothering voice.

It was the Terrible Time, when we can't see. Milklight fills the night, but when the sky blazes and the earth is black, the contrast means we can see nothing. Leveza reached down, bit my neck to help haul me up.

I was only halfway into the cart when out of that darkness a deep rumble formed words. "We will make the Horses eat you first."

Leveza let me go to shriek out the danger call, to tell the others. I tried to kick my way into the cart.

"Then while you cry we will take their delicious legs."

I felt claws rake the back of my calves. I screamed and scrambled. A blast right by my ears deafened me; I pulled myself in; I smelt dust in the air.

Leveza. How could she see? How could she walk upright all day?

She touched a tar lamp, opened its vent, and it gave light. "Aim for eyes," she said.

We saw yellow eyes, narrow and glowing, pure evil, hypnotizing. Ten, fifteen, how many were there, trying to scramble into the wagon?

Grama shot. Leveza shot. I had no gun and yearned to run so stamped

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my feet and cried for help. Some of the eyes closed and spun away. I looked at Mother Cat. She had folded up, eyes closed, but I was maddened and began to kick her as if she threatened my child. The sun sank.

Finally we heard a battle cry and a thundering of hooves from the circle. Leveza bit my neck and threw me to the floor of the cart. My nostrils were pushed into a pool of Cat juices. I heard shots and metal singing through the air. Our mares were firing wildly at anything. Why couldn't they see?

"Put that lamp out!" shouted Fortchee. Leveza stretched forward and flicked it shut. Then in milklight, our *afriradors* took more careful aim. I felt rather than heard a kind of thumping rustle, bullets in flesh, feet through grass. I peered out over the sides of the wagon and in milklight, I saw the Cats pulling back, slipping up and over rocks, crouching behind them. I lay back down and looked at Mother Cat. She shivered, her eyes screwed shut. A Cat felt fear?

We could still smell them, we could still hear them.

Fortchee said, "All of you, back into the circle. You too, Leveza."

She snuffled from weariness. "Can't!"

I cried, "Leveza! Those are real Cats, they will come back! What you care about her?"

"I did this to her," Leveza said.

Fortchee asked, "Why do other Cats want to kill her?"

A deep voice next to me purred through broken teeth. "Dissh-honour."

Chilled, everyone fell silent.

"Alsho, I talk too much," said Mother Cat. Did she chuckle?

I pleaded. "Choova misses you; she wants her groom-mummy; I miss you; please, Leveza, come back!" Fortchee ordered the men to give her a third gun and some ammo.

Grama looked at me with a question in her eyes I didn't want to see. As far as I was concerned, Fortchee had told us to pull back. I was shaking inside. Grama wasn't the one who had felt claws on her haunches.

All the way back, Grama bit the back of my neck as if carrying me like a mother.

We nestled down under a wagon behind the windbreak walls. Choova worked her way between us. None of us could sleep even the two hours.

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We paced and pawed. I stood up and looked out, and saw Leveza standing on watch, unfaltering.

At dawnsky when she would have most difficulty seeing, I heard shots, repeated. I fought my way out from under the wagon, and jerked my head over the windbreak between the carts where there are only timbers.

Blank whiteness, blank darkness, and in the middle a lamp glowing like a second sunrise. I could see nothing except swirling smoke and yellow dust and Leveza hunching behind the sides of the wagon, suddenly nipping up to shoot. Someone else glowed orange in that light, firing from the other side.

Leveza had given a gun to the Cat.

I saw leaping arms fanning what looked like knives. Everything spiraled in complete silence. The Cats made no sound at all. I was still rearing up my head over the windbreak to look, when suddenly, in complete silence, a Cat's head launched itself at my face. All I saw was snout, yellow eyes, fangs in a blur jammed up close to me. I leapt back behind the windbreak; the thing roared, a paralyzing sound that froze me. I could feel it make me go numb. The numbness takes away the pain as they eat you.

I couldn't think for a long time after that. I stood there shaking, gradually becoming aware of my pounding heart. Others were up, had begun to work; the sun was high; dawnsky was over. I heard Choova call me, but I couldn't answer. She galloped out to me, crying and weeping. Grama followed, looked concerned, and then began to trot.

It showed in my face. "Did one of them get in here?" she asked.

I couldn't answer, just shook my head, no. Choova cried, frightened for me. "It climbed the wall," I said and realized I'd been holding my breath.

"Leveza's not in the wagon," said Grama. We reared up to look over the wall. The slope was grassy, wide, the day bright. The wagon stood alone, with nothing visible in it. Grama looked at me.

Maybe she'd gone to graze? I scanned the fields, and caught motion from the slopes behind me, turned and my heart shivered with relief. There was Leveza slowly climbing toward us.

"What's she doing down there, that's where the Cats are!"

She held something in her mouth. For moment I thought she'd gone

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back again for Kaway. Then I saw feathers. Birds? As she lowered herself, they swayed limply.

"She's been hunting," said Grama.

"She's gone mad," I said.

"I fear so."

We told Choova to stay where she was and Grama and I trotted out to meet her. "Is that what I think it is? Is it?" I shouted at her. I was weepier than I would normally be, shaken.

Leveza reared up and took the dead quail out of her mouth. "She needs to eat something," said Leveza. She was in one of her hearty, blustering moods, cheerful about everything and unstoppable. She strode on two legs. She'd braided her mane and then held it on top of her head with plastic combs, out of her eyes.

Grama sighed. "We don't take life, Leveza. We value it."

She looked merry. She shook the quail. "I value thought. These things can't think."

"That's a horrible thing to say!"

She swept past us. "You'd rather she ate us, I suppose. Or maybe you want her to die. How does that show you value life?"

She trooped on toward the cart.

Grama had an answer. "I'd rather the Cat hunted for herself."

"Good. I'll give her a gun then."

I was furious. "She had a gun last night!"

"Oh. Yes. Well. She was a welcome addition to our resources." Leveza smiled. "Since I was otherwise on my own." She looked at me dead in the eye and her meaning was plain enough.

"If they value life so much, why did they take Kaway then?" I was sorry the instant I said it. I meant that I'd heard her ask the Cat that and I wanted to know the answer too, just like she did.

"Because I broke the bargain," she said, so calmly that I was almost frightened.

I wanted to show her that I was outraged at what they'd done. "What bargain?"

She lost some kind of patience. "Oh come on, Akwa, you're not a child. The bargain! The one where they don't take children so they grow up nice and fat for them to eat later and we let them take our old and sick.

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They get to eat, and we get rid of people whose only use is that they are experienced and wise, something Horses can't use, because of course we know everything already. So we don't shoot Cats except to scare them off, and they don't shoot us." Her eyes looked like the Cats' reflecting our lamps. "*That* bargain."

"I...I'm sorry."

"I shot them when they took the old. They saw I was the leader so I was the target."

Grama and I looked at each other. Grama said, with just a hint of a smile, "You ...?"

"Yes me. The Cats can see it even if you can't."

Grama pulled back her lips as if to say, oops, pushed her too far that time. As we followed her Grama butted me gently with her head. *It's just Leveza fabricating.*

Leveza strode ahead of us, as if she didn't need us, and it was uncomfortably like she didn't.

Once at the cart, Leveza took out a knife and began to butcher the quail. I cried and turned away. She pushed the meat toward the Cat, who opened her eyes but did not move. The creature had had to relieve herself in the cart so the stink was worse than ever.

Leveza dropped onto all fours and trotted to the neck of the cart. "Help me into the yoke?"

"You've not asked me about Choova."

"How is she?" She picked up the yoke by herself.

"Terrified and miserable. She saw the empty cart and thought you were dead."

Grama helped settle the yoke, slipping in the pin. At once Leveza started to drag the cart forward

"You're going now?" The camp was not even being dismantled.

"Stragglers get taken. Today I intend to be in front. We start going downhill."

"Let's go!" I said to Grama, furious, but she shook her head and walked on beside the cart. "I've got a gun," she said. "We should guard her."

I should have gone back to take care of Choova, but it felt wrong somehow to leave someone else guarding my groom-mate. I shouted to

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Choova as we passed the camp. "Groom-mummy is fine, darling; we're just going with her to make sure she's safe."

So all of us walked together, the cart jostling and thunking over rocks.

"So tell them, Mai. Why does the world need predators?"

I looked into the wagon, and saw that the Cat had clenched about herself like fingers curled up inside a hoof. I could sense waves of illness coming of her. I saw the horrible meat. She hadn't touched it. She looked at me with dead eyes.

"Go on, Mai; explain!"

The Cat forced herself to talk, and rolled onto her back, submissively.

"*'ere wasssh a ribber...*," she said, toothlessly. "There was a river and there were many goats and many wolves to eat them." Her voice sounded comic. Everything came out sssh wvuh and boub, like the voices we adopt when we tell jokes. "*Verh whuh whvolbss*...there were wolves, and the Ancestors killed all the wolves because they were predators."

It was exactly as though she were telling a funny story. I was triggered. I started to laugh.

"And then the rivers started to die. With nothing to eat them, there were too many goats and they ate all the new trees that held the banks together."

I shook my head to get rid of the laughter. I trembled inside from fear. I wanted to wee.

The Cat groaned. "Issh nop a zhope!" *It's not a joke.*

Leveza craned her neck back, looking as though she was teaching me a lesson, her eyes glinting at me in a strange look of triumph and wonder. "What Memory Sticks do Cats have?"

"We know about the seeds, the seeds inside us."

Grama's ears stood straight up.

Leveza's words kept pace with her heavy feet, as if nothing could ever frighten her or hurry her. "Cats know how Ancestors and beasts mingled. They understand how life is made. We could split us up again, Horse and Ancestor. We could give them something else to eat."

It was all too much for me, as if the Earth were turning in the wind. I was giddy.

Grama marched head bowed, looking thoughtful. "So...you know what the other peoples know?"

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Leveza actually laughed aloud too. "She does! She does!"

"What do Dogs know?" Grama asked.

The Cat kept telling what sounded like jokes. "Things that are not alive are made of seeds too. Rocks and air and water are all made of tiny things. Dogs know all about those."

"And goats?"

"Ah! Goats know how the universe began."

"And electricity?" Grama actually stepped closer to the Cat. "Everything we know is useless without electricity."

"Bovines," said the Cat. "I've never seen one. But I've heard. You go south and you know you are there because they have lights that glow with electricity!"

"We could make a new kind of herd," Leveza said. "A herd of all the peoples that joins together. We could piece it all together, all that knowledge."

The Cat rolled on her belly and covered her eyes. Grama looked at her and at me, and we thought the same thing. Wounded, no food, no water—I felt nausea, the Cat's sickness in my own belly. Why didn't Leveza?

Grama said, almost as if defending the Cat. "We'd have to all stay together though, all the time. All of us mixed. Or we'd forget it all."

The Cat rumbled. "The Bears have something called writing. It records. But only the big white ones in the south."

"Really!" Leveza said. "If we could do that, we could send knowledge everywhere."

"I've thought that," the Cat said quietly. "Calling all of us together. But my people would eat them all."

It was one of those too-bright days that cloud over, but for now, the sun dazzled.

"The dolphins in the sea," murmured the Cat as if dreaming. "They know how stars are made and stay in the sky. They use them to navigate."

Sun and wind.

"Sea turtles understand all the different elements, how to mix them."

Grama said, "She needs water."

Leveza sniffed. "We've crossed a watershed. We're going downhill; there'll be a stream soon." We marched on, toward cauliflower clouds.

Grama and I took over pulling the wagon for a time. I don't know what

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hauling it uphill is like, but going downhill, the whole weight of it pushes into your shoulders and your legs go rubbery pushing back to stop it rolling out of control.

It's worrying being yoked: you can't run as fast; you're trapped with the cart. I looked back 'round and saw Leveza in the cart fast asleep, side by side with a Cat.

I found myself thinking like Leveza, and said to Grama. "I can't aim a gun. You better keep watch."

So I ended up pulling the cart alone, while Grama stood in the wagon with a gun, and I didn't know which one of us was the biggest target.

The slope steepened, and we entered a gully, a dry wash between crags. The wind changed direction constantly, buffeting us with the scent of Cat.

"They're back," I said to Grama.

The scent woke up Leveza. "Thank you," she said. "The two of you should go join the others." She dropped heavily down out of the cart. She searched me with her eyes, some kind of apology in them. "Choova's alone."

Grama's chin tapped me twice. Leveza was right. As we climbed together uphill toward the herd, I said, "Cats don't go out of their territory."

"They're following Leveza. They want Mai, they want her." In other words, Leveza was pulling the Cats with her.

"Don't tell the others," I said.

The wall of faces above us on the hill opened up to admit us, and then closed again behind. We found Choova, who had been having fun with playmates. She'd forgotten Cats, Leveza, everything, and was full of giggles and teasing, pulling my mane. As we walked, the herd gradually caught up with Leveza, and we could hear her and the Cat murmuring to each other.

"What on earth do they find to talk about?" said Raio, my cousin.

"How delicious horseflesh is," said Ventoo.

Choova scowled. "Everybody says that Leveza is bad." I stroked her and tried to explain it and found that I could not. All I could say was, "Leveza wants to learn."

The trail crossed a stream and Fortchee signaled a break. Leveza's cart

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was already there with Leveza still in harness reaching down to drink. The trickling sound of safe, shallow water triggered a rush. We crowded round the creek, leaning down and thrusting each other's head out of the way. Grama trotted up the hill to make room and found herself the farthest one out, the most exposed. I was about to say, *Grama get back.*

Three Cats pounced on her. The entire herd pulled back and away from her, swiftly, like smoke blown by wind. Two Cats gripped her hind legs; one was trying to tear out her throat. She was dead, Grama was dead, I was sure of it. I kept leaping forward and back in some kind of impulse to help. Then came a crackle of gunfire. The two Cats on her hindquarters yowled and were thrown back. One spun away and ran; one flipped over backward and was still.

Then one miraculous shot: it sliced through the Cat in front without touching Grama. I looked back in the cart and saw that Leveza had been held down in harness, unable to stand up or reach for her gun.

In the back of the wagon, head and rifle over the sides, was Mother Cat.

Grama shook and shivered, her whole hide twitching independently from the muscles underneath, her eyes ringed round with white. She wasn't even breathing, she was so panicked. I knew exactly how awful that felt. I ronfled the comfort sound over and over as I picked my way to her, touched her. She heaved a huge, painful-sounding breath. I got hold of the back of her neck. "Come on darling, come on baby," I said through clenched teeth. I coaxed her back downstream toward the others. Her rattling breath came in sobs.

There were no sympathy nitters. The other Horses actually pulled back from us as if we carried live flame. Grama nodded that she was all right and I let her go. She still shivered, but she stepped gently back and forth to test her torn rear legs. I lifted the healer's pack from her shoulders and took out the bark water to wash her.

I was angry at the others and shouted at them. "It's all right, all of you, leave her be. Just leave her alone. She's nursed you often enough."

Fortchee stepped toward us, breathed in her scent to see how badly hurt she was.

Then he looked over in the direction of the Cat, who still held the gun. He calmly turned and walked toward the cart. Leveza had finally

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succeeded in slipping out of the yoke and begun to climb the hill back toward him.

I tried to coax Grama back to our wagons, but she firmly shook her head. She wanted to listen to what Fortchee said.

I couldn't quite hear him, but I certainly could hear Leveza. "She has just as much reason to escape them as you do!"

Fortchee's voice went harsher, giving an order.

"No," said Leveza. He said something else, and Leveza replied. "It seems she's done a good job of protecting us."

His voice was loud. "Out, now! You or her or both of you."

"I'm already out. Haven't you noticed?"

She stepped back toward the long neck of the cart and slammed back on the yoke. "I don't need you, and I don't have you!"

She wrenched herself round, almost dragging the cart sideways, turning it down to follow the stream itself. Fortchee shouted for a break. "*Afriradors*, guard everyone while they drink." To my surprise, Grama began to limp as fast as she could after Leveza's wagon.

I couldn't let her go alone, so I followed, taking Choova with me. As we trooped down the hill, we passed Fortchee trudging up the slope, his head hanging. He ignored us. A Head Man cannot afford to be defied to his face too often.

I caught up to Grama. We hobbled over rocks, or splashed through shallow pools. Choova rubbed her chin against my flank for comfort. Leveza saw us behind her and stopped.

"Hello, darling," Leveza called back to Choova, who clattered forward, glad to see her. They interlaced their heads, breathed each other's breath. I pressed in close, and felt my eyes sting. We were still a family.

Grama stuck her head over the sides of the wagon. "Thank you," she told Mai.

"You nursed me," said the Cat.

"Mai?" said Leveza. "This is my groom-daughter Choova."

"Choova," said the Cat and smiled, and crawled up the wagon to be nearer. "I have a boy, Choova, a little boy." Choova looked uncertain and edged back.

"Is he back...with the pride?" Leveza asked.

"Yesh. But he won't want to know me now." Mai slumped back down

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in the wagon. "Everything with us is the hunt. Nobody thinks about anything else." She shrugged. "He's getting mature now, he would have been driven off soon anyway."

Leveza stopped pulling. "You should drink some water."

As slow as molten metal, the Cat poured herself out of the cart, halting on tender paws. She drank, but not enough, looked weary, and then wove her unsteady way back toward the wagon. She started to laugh. "I can't get back in."

Leveza slipped out of harness and we all helped roll Mai onto Leveza's back. Grama sprang back up into the cart, and helped pull up the Cat.

"Good to be among friends," Mai whispered.

Leveza stroked her head. "Neither one of us can go back home," she said, staring at Mai with a sad smile. Then she looked at me, with an expression that seemed to say, I think she's going to die.

I wanted to say, I'm supposed to care about a Cat?

"Don't you get pushed out too," she said to me, and jerked her head in the direction of the herd. She asked us to bring her lots of lamp fuel, and Grama promised that she would. As we walked toward the others, I couldn't stop myself saying in front of Choova. "She's in love with that bloody Cat!"

THAT NIGHT, Choova, me and Grama slept together again beneath a wagon, behind the windbreak wall.

In the middle of the night, we heard burrowing and saw claws, digging underneath the timbers, trying to get in. We jammed little stakes into the tender places between their toes. I cradled Choova next to me as we heard shots from overhead and Cat cries. We saw flickering light through the boards and smelled smoke. Fortchee stuck his head underneath the wagon. "Leveza's set the hillside on fire! We have to beat it back." He looked wild. "Come on! There's no more Cats but the camp's catching fire!" He head-butted Ventoo. "We need everyone!"

Light on the opposite hillside left dim blue and gray shadows across our eyes. Fire rained slowly down, embers from the grass, drifting sparks. Ash tickled our nostrils; we couldn't quite see. We had fuel and firestarters on the wagons; if those caught alight we'd lose everything.

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"That bloody woman!" shouted Ventoo. Blindly, we got out blankets and started to beat back the grass fire, aiming for any blur of light. The men stumbled down the stream with buckets to fill, stepping blindly into dark, wondering if Cats awaited them. The ground sizzled, steamed, and trailed smoke. We slapped wet blankets onto the gnawing red lines in the wood.

It was still milklight, and the fire had not burnt out, when Fortchee called for us to pack up and march. Blearily, we hoisted up the windbreak walls, only too happy to move. The smell of ash was making us ill. I glanced up and saw that Leveza had already gone.

Butt her! I thought. My own milk had given out on the trek, and Choova was hungry. What do you have a groom-mate for if not to help nurse your child? "You'll have to graze, baby," I told her.

We churned up clouds of ash. I wandered though something crisp and tangled and realized I had trodden in the burnt carcass of a Cat. Later in the grass we saw the quail that Leveza had shot, thrown away, the meat gone dark and dry. The Cat still had not eaten.

"I want to see if Mai's all right," said Grama.

In full milklight, we trotted ahead to the wagon to find the Cat asleep and Leveza hauling the wagon on two legs only, keeping watch with the rifle ready. She passed us the gun and settled down onto all fours and started to haul again. Her face and voice were stern. "She says it would be possible to bring Horses back, full-blooded Horses. Can you imagine? They could have something else to eat, all of this could stop!"

"What? How?" said Grama.

"The Ancestors wanted to be able to bring both back. We have the complete information for Horses and Ancestors too. We still carry them inside us!"

"So...what do we do?" Grama asked.

"Bee-sh," said a voice from the cart. The Cat sat up, with a clown's expression on her face. She chuckled. "You could carry them forever, and they wouldn't come out. They need something from Bees."

For some reason, Leveza chuckled too. She was always so serious and weighty that I could never make her laugh.

"It's called...." The Cat paused and then wiggled her eyebrows. "*Ek-die-ssshone*." She paused. "That-ssh a word. I don't know what it mean-sh either. It's just in my head."

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That Cat knew her toothless voice was funny. She was playing up to it. I saw then how clever she was, how clever she had been. She knew just what to say to get Leveza on her side.

"Bee-sh make honey, and bee-sh make Horshes."

"So you give the seed something from bees, and we give birth to full-bloods?" Everything about Grama stood up alert and turned toward the Cat.

"Not you too," I moaned.

Finally I made Leveza laugh. "Oh Akwa, you old chestnut!"

"No," said the Cat. "What gets born is much, much closer to Horses. It's a mix of you and a full-blooded Horse, but then we can...."

"Breed back!" said Grama. "Just pair off the right ones."

"Yup," said the Cat. "I've alsway-sssh thought I could do it. I jussht needed lotsh of Horshes. My pridemates had sschtrong tendenshee to eat them."

There was something deadly in Leveza's calm. "We could bring back the Ancestors. Imagine what they could tell us! Maybe they have all the memory sticks, all together."

The Cat leaned back, her work done. "They knew nothing. They had no memory. Everything they knew, they had to learn. How to walk. How to talk. All over again each time. So they could forget. But they could learn."

Overhead the stars looked like a giant spider's web, all glistening with dew.

"They wanted to travel to the stars. So they thought they would carry the animals and plants inside them. And they were worried that all their knowledge would be lost. How, they asked, can we make the information safe? So they made it like the knowledge every spider has: how to weave a web."

"Kaway," said Leveza, in a mourning voice.

I felt as thought I had gone to sleep on the ground all alone instead of sleeping on my feet to watch. This was madness, just the kind of madness to capture Leveza. I will keep watch now, I promised myself.

"Maybe one day the Ancestors will sail back." Leveza arched her neck and looked up at the stars.

* * *

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All the next day, as we headed east, they talked their nonsense. Nowadays, I wish that I had listened and could remember it, but all I heard then was that the Cat was subverting my Leveza. I knew it was no good pleading with her to let all of this madness alone, to come home, to be as we were. How I wanted that Cat to die. I've never felt so alone and useless.

"Don't worry, love," said Grama. "It's Leveza's way."

I was too angry to answer.

The stream dipped down through green hills which suddenly fell away. We stopped at the top of a slope, looking out over a turquoise and gray plain. We had made it to the eastern slopes facing the sea. The grass was long and soft and rich, so we grazed as we walked, and I hoped my milk would come back. The foals, Choova included, began to run up and down through the meadows as if already home. We'd made it; we would be fine.

Fortchee kept pushing us, getting us well out of the Cats' range. Still, it was strange; this was flatlands, full of tall grass. Why were there no other Cats? I kept sniffing the wind, we all did, but all we smelled was the pure fresh smell of grazing.

It was not until near sunset that Fortchee brayed for camp. Grama and I went back, and I kicked the grass as I walked. Grama chewed my mane and called me poor love. "She's always loved ideas. The Cat is full of them."

"Yes, she wants us to make new children to feed to her!" I pulled Choova closer to me and nuzzled her.

We camped, grazed, and watered, but I couldn't settle. I paced round and round. I went back to our wagon, slumped down, and tried to feed Choova again. I couldn't. I wept. I was dry like old grass, and I had no one to help me and felt alone, abandoned. I heard Leveza start to sing! Sing, while sleeping with a Cat. She was blank, unfeeling, something restraining had been left out of her. She didn't love me, she didn't love anything. Just her fabrications. And she'd pulled me and used me up and left me alone.

Choova was restless too. For a while, getting her to sleep occupied me. Finally her breathing fell regular, soft and smelling of hay, sweet and young and trusting, her long slim face resting on my haunches.

I lay there and heard Leveza sing the songs about sunrise, pasture, running through fields, the kinds of songs you sing when you are excited, young.

In love.

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Sleep wouldn't come, peace wouldn't come. I turned over and Choova stirred, Grama groaned. I was keeping them awake. Suddenly I was determined to bring all of this to a stop. I was going to go out there and get my groom-mate back. So I rolled quietly out from under the wagon. Everything was still; even birds and insects — no stars, no moon. Yet I thought I heard...something.

I reared up to look over the windbreaks and saw light over the horizon, and drifting white smoke. I thought it was the last of the fire then realized it was in the wrong direction. Did I hear shots? And mewling?

I was about to give the danger call when Fortchee stepped up to me. "*Fuhfuhfoom*," he said, the quiet call. "That's Cat fighting Cat. The ones chasing us have strayed into another pride's territory."

I felt ice on our shoulders. We stood and watched and listened and our focusing ears seemed to pull the sound closer to us.

A battle between Cats.

"We can sleep on a little longer in safety," he said. "I had to tell Leveza to stop singing."

I started to walk. "I need to talk sense to that woman."

"Good luck." He pulled a cart aside, to make a gap for me. "Be careful anyway."

As I walked toward the wagon the sound grew, a growling, roaring, crying, a sound like a creeping wildfire. It was as if all the world had gone mad along with me.

I slipped down the track, silently, rehearsing what I would say to her. I would tell her to come back to Choova and the herd and let the Cat do what it could to survive. I would tell her: You choose. Me or that Cat. I would force her to come back, force her to be sensible.

I got halfway down the track, and clouds moved away from the moon, and I saw.

At first I thought Leveza was just grooming her. That would have been enough to make me sick, the thought of grooming something that smelt of death, of blood.

But it wasn't grooming. The Cat had not eaten for days, was wounded and hungry, and Leveza had leaking tits.

I saw her suckling a Cat.

The Earth spun. I had never known that such perversion existed; I'd

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never heard of normal groom-mates doing such a thing. But what a fearful confounding was this, of species, of mother, of child? While my Choova starved, that Cat, that monster, was being fed, given horsemilk as if by a loving mother.

I gagged and made a little cry and stumbled and coughed and I think those two in the wagon turned and saw me. I spun around and galloped, hooves pounding, and I was calling over and over "Foul, foul, foul!"

I wailed and I heard answering shouts from inside the camp. Ventoo and Lindalfa came hobbling out to me.

"Akwa, darling!"

"Akwa, what's wrong?"

They were mean-eyed. "What's *she* done now?" They were yearning for bad news about Leveza

I wept and wailed and tried to pull myself away. "She won't feed Choova but she's feeding that Cat."

"What do you mean, feed?"

I couldn't answer.

"Hunting! Yes we saw! Killing for that thing!"

"Foul, yes, poor Akwa!"

I hauled in a breath that pushed my voice box the wrong way.

"It's not hunting!" I was frothing at the mouth, the spittle and foam splayed over my lips and chin. "Uhhhhh!"

I wished the grass would slash her like a thousand needles. I wanted hot embers poured down her throat, I wanted her consumed, I wanted the Cats to come and make good all their terrible threats. Yes, yes, eat your Cat lover and then be eaten too. Call for me and I will call back to you: *You deserve this!*

Grama was there. "Akwa, calm down. Down, Akwa." She ronfled the soothing noise. I blew out spittle at her, rejecting the trigger from my belly outward. I shriek-whinnied in a mixture of fear, horror, and something like the sickness call.

"She's suckling the Cat!"

Silence.

Someone giggled.

I head-butted the person I thought had laughed. "Suckling. An adult. Cat!"

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Grama fell silent. I shouted at her. "Heard of that before, Midwife?" My eyes were round; my teeth were shovels for flesh; I was enraged at everything and everyone.

Grama stepped back. Fortchee stepped forward. "What is all this noise?"

I told him. I told him good, I told him long. Ventoo bit my tail to keep me in place; the others rubbed me with their snouts.

"Poor thing! Her groom-mate."

"Enough," said Fortchee. He turned and started to walk toward their wagon.

"Too true there!" said Ventoo. Old Pronto grabbed a gun.

We all followed, making a sound like a slow small rockslide, down toward the cart.

Leveza stood up in the wagon, waiting. So did the Cat.

"Give us your guns," said Fortchee.

"We can't...."

"I'm not asking, I'm ordering."

Leveza looked at him, as if moonlight still shone on his face. She sighed, and looked up at the stars, and handed him her gun.

"The Cat's too."

Silently Leveza held it out to him.

"Now get down out of that cart and rejoin the herd."

"And Mai?" Such regret, such fondness, such concern for blood-breathed Cat.

The spittle curdled; the heart shriveled; I tasted gall, and I said, "She's taken a Cat for a groom-mate. I don't want her! I don't want her back!"

Her head jerked up at me in wonder.

"All her fabricating!"

I felt myself rear up in the air, and I bucked. I bucked to get away from my own heart, from the things I'd seen, for the way I'd been stretched. I was tired, I was frightened, I wanted her to be as we had been. Our girlhoods when we galloped beribboned over the hill.

"She'd feed my child to that bloody Cat!"

Reared up, wrenching, I made a noise I had never heard before, never knew could be made.

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It was like giving birth through the throat, some ghastly wriggling thing made of sound that needed to be born, and it came out of me, headless and blind. A relentless, howling pushing-back that flecked everything with foam as if I were the sea.

Triggered.

Even Fortchee.

All.

We all moved together, closing like a gate. Our shoulders touched and our haunches. We lowered our heads. We advanced. I saw Leveza look into my eyes and then crumple. She knew what this was, even if I did not, and she knew it had come from me.

We advanced and butted the cart. We pushed all our heads under it and turned the cart over. Leveza and the Cat had to jump out, clumsy, stumbling to find their feet.

The Cat snarled, toothless. Leveza shook her head. "Friends...."

We were deaf. We were upon them. We head-butted them. Leveza slipped backward, onto her knees. Fortchee reared up and clubbed her on the head with his hooves. She stood up, turned. Fortchee, Ventoo, Raio, Pronto, all bared their teeth and bit her buttocks hard. Feet splaying sideways, she began to run.

The Cat bounded, faster in bursts than Leveza was, and leapt up onto her back. Leveza trotted away, carrying her. Her tail waved, defiant. Then milklight closed over them as if they had sunk. We heard light scattering sounds of stones for a while, then even her hoofbeats faded into the whispering sound of spaces between mountains.

Without a word, Grama sprang after them. I saw her go too. There were no Cats on the plain to seize them as the horizon burned.

The herd swung to the left in absolute unison, wheeling around, and then trotted back to the camp. We felt satisfied, strangely nourished, safe and content. I looked back under the cart. Choova raised her head. "What was that, Mummy?"

"Nothing, love, nothing," I said.

Fortchee told us quietly that we should get moving now while the Cats were occupied. We dismantled the windbreaks and packed the tools. Some of the men turned Leveza's cart upright and old Pronto went back to his post in harness. Never did we pack with so little noise, so swiftly,

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calmly. Nothing was said at all, no mention of it. The horizon burned with someone else's passion.

Choova ran out to graze, her mane bobbing. She never asked about Leveza or Grama, not once, ever. A soft glowing light spread wide across the pampas.

WE FOLLOWED the stream to the sea and then migrated along the sand. It got between our fingers. We did see the turtles. I would have asked them about acids, especially the acids in batteries, but they were laying eggs, and would have been fearful.

Fortchee led us to a wonderful pasture, far to the south, on a lake next to sea, salt and fresh water so close, beside tall sudden cliffs that kept Cats at bay. Oats grew there year round; the rains never left. By digging we found rust shoals, thick layers of it, enough to make metal for several lifetimes. There was no reason to leave. We waited for the trigger to leave, but year in, year out, none came.

Fortchee had us build a stone wall across the small peninsula of land that connected our islet to the mainland, and we were safe from Cats. When he died, we called him our greatest innovator.

On top of a high hill we found the fallen statue of an Ancestor, his face melted, his arms outstretched. As if to welcome Ancestors back from the stars.

No one came to me in the night to comfort me or bite my neck and call me love. I suppose I'd been touched by something strange and so was strange myself. I would have taken a low-rank drifter, only they did not get past the wall. Still, I had my Choova. She brought me her children to bless, and then her grandchildren, though they never really recognized what I was to them. Their children had no idea that I still lived. My loneliness creaked worse than my joints and I yearned for a migration, to sweep me numbly away.

Not once did anyone speak of Leveza, or even once remember her. Our exiled groom-brothers would drift by, to temporarily gladsome cries, and they told us, before moving on, of new wonders on the prairie. But we blanked that too.

Until one dusk, I saw the strangest thing picking its way down toward our lagoon.

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It looked like a fine and handsome young girl, beautifully formed though very very long in the trunk. She raised her head from drinking and her mane fell back. The top of her face was missing, from right above the eyes. It was terrible to see, someone so young but so deformed. She whinnied in hope and fear, and I ronfled back comfort to her, and then asked her name. But she couldn't talk.

A horse. I was looking at a full-blooded horse. I felt a chill on my legs and wondered: did they bring the Ancestors back, too?

"Leveza?" I asked it, and it raised and lowered its head, and I thought the creature knew the name. It suddenly took fright, started, and trotted away into the night, as someone else once had.

Then there was a sound like thousands of cards being shuffled, and a score of the creatures emerged from the trees. They bent their long necks down to drink. Their legs worked backward.

A voice said softly, "Is that Akwa?" Against a contrast sky, I saw the silhouette of a monster, two headed, tall. Then I recognized the gun.

She had trained one of the things to carry her, so she would always sit tall and have her hands free. I couldn't speak. Somewhere beyond the trees carts rumbled.

"Hello my love," she said. I was hemorrhaging memory, a continual stream; and all of it about her — how she spoke, how she smelled, how she always went too far, and how I wished that I'd gone with her too all those years ago.

"We're going south, to find the Bears, get us some of that writing. Want to come?" I still could not speak. "It's perfectly safe. We've bought along something else for them to eat."

I think that word "safe" was the trigger. I did the giggle of embarrassment and fear. I drank sweet water and then followed. We found writing, and here it is.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Till Human Voices Shake Us, and We Frown

"Advertisers have a new way to get into your head...audio technology that sends sound in a narrow beam... Court TV recently installed the audio spotlight in ceilings of bookstores to promote the network's new murder-mystery show. A voice, whispering, 'Hey, you, can you hear me? Do you ever think about murder?' was beamed towards customers as they browsed...."

—"The marketers have your ear," Jenn Abelson, *The Boston Globe*, 4/24/07.

I WAS hoping the therapist could help me.

I had begun hearing voices, and was worried.

Only in certain situations, however. And the voices hadn't counseled me to do any harm yet, to myself or others. In fact, their messages were rather perplexing. Nonetheless, I needed to clear this matter up.

Doctor Loverso was younger than I, always a mildly disconcerting fact to encounter in such professional relationships. He resembled Leonardo DiCaprio with a wispy mustache and less facial baby fat. We exchanged handshakes, and I took a seat. Dr. Loverso picked up a steno pad and pen.

"Now, Mr. Oster, please describe your problem to me."

"Well, Doctor, I'd guess, from what little I've read, that I'm experiencing your run-of-the-mill auditory hallucinations. Voices that aren't mine, that have no source, and which seem to originate right in my ears."

"How often does this happen?"

"Only infrequently, and always when I'm in some public setting, like a mall or store or urban plaza."

"And what do these voices tell you?"

"That's the bizarre thing. I thought that in such situations, unbalanced people tended to hear comments related to the environment

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and their personal lives. Orders to indulge in inappropriate behavior, old grudges dug up, that sort of thing. But these voices don't get into that territory at all. Instead, they say things like, 'Litter hurts everyone.' Or 'I bet you're wondering how to get your wash whiter.' Or, 'Have you checked your tire treads lately?' Or, 'Anita Shreve does it again!' Doctor, I don't even know anyone named Anita Shreve! It's driving me crazy — if I'm not already. Please, can you help me?"

I waited with a grim expectancy that was shattered by the doctor's sudden loud laughter!

Indignant, I got to my feet. "If you can't take my predicament seriously, Doctor, I'll just be going — "

"No, no, please sit back down! It's just that you're the first patient to come to me with this problem. When I read about it in all the medical journals, I thought it seemed ridiculous. But now that I've encountered a real-life instance of it, I can see how serious it is. Although it still has its ridiculous side."

Reluctant but curious, I sat back down. "What can you mean, Doctor?"

"You're not going crazy. You're merely the unwitting victim of some new advertising technology."

Doctor Loverso explained then all about the audio spotlight. I began to curse.

"But that's horrible! It's an unwarranted intrusion into one of the last bastions of privacy a person has."

The doctor shrugged. "I'm afraid we'll all have to get used to it, Mr. Oster. That's modern life. Now, I suggest that just to prove to yourself what's happening, you visit a store where this has occurred before, and verify what I've told you."

The nearest Borders was just a few blocks away from Dr. Loverso's office, and I recalled having experienced some voices there. So off I went.

At the store, I tracked down the manager and demanded to know if they were using the audio spotlight.

He was a Greek-looking fellow whose name tag proclaimed him A. Eolus. He had the virtue of at least looking embarrassed when I confronted him.

"Yes, yes, I confess. We were using this damn audio spotlight, but no more. It is a disturbing tale. Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"Well, first you must know that I was against it from the start. I figured it would hardly be effective, since so many people have their

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ears stoppered up with iPod earbuds these days. But my bosses would not listen to me. So the madness commenced.

"We began with a campaign for the new Jonathan Lethem novel, *You Don't Love Me Yet*. Can you guess what happened? People began breaking down in tears inside my store! Cellphones came out by the dozens, as people called their lovers and spouses to give and seek emotional reassurance. I understand the divorce rate in this city has since risen by several percent."

I began to think that my own troubles involving the audio spotlight had been minimal.

"Then," continued Mr. Eolus, "we switched to some publicity for Bernard Goldberg's *Crazies to the Left of Me, Wimps to the Right*. Same tactic, running the title over and over through the audio spotlight, directly into people's unsuspecting ears. The chaos in the store was incredible! People tried to shy away from anyone on their left, but began pushing and shoving people to their right. Fights, yelling, the police — It was madness, I tell you!"

"Didn't your bosses learn their lesson after that?"

"Not at all! They had a contract with the audio spotlight people and obligations to many publicists. We couldn't remove these infernal gadgets. So they tried a third time, with Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*."

I winced, and Mr. Eolus nodded sagely.

"Yes, yes, you can picture it, I see. Screams of fear, people clutching to bookcases for support, afraid to walk for fear of falling off some impossible edge of the world into space! I saw sights of abject horror I hope never to see again."

"I don't hear the audio spotlight now. I assume the Friedman incident caused you to stop using the device...?"

"No, it took one more time. You see, the audio spotlight takes its input by CD, and one of our new clerks thought she was programming the music system for the store. She inserted *The Very Best of Donna Summer*. Sir, do you know what the very first song is on that accursed album?"

"Not — "

"Yes, sir, yes! 'Love to Love You Baby'! Sir, I am a family man. I do not indulge in pornographic movies. But what I saw happen that day in my poor store completely undid all my adult years of visual chastity! It took three fire trucks with much cold water delivered

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through large hoses to stop the orgy. The store is only now finished with renovations."

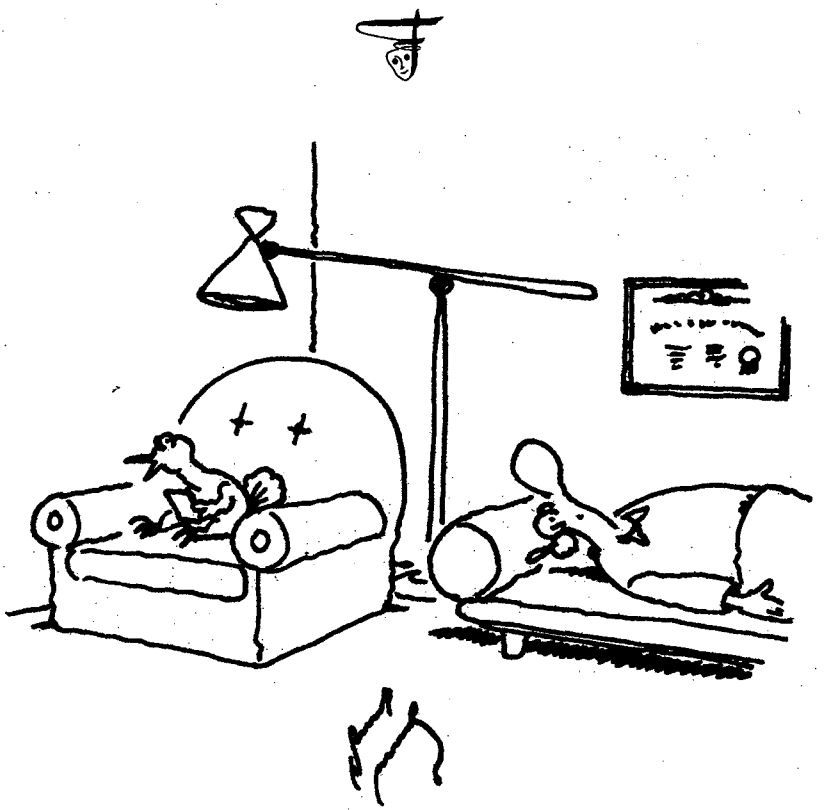
Full of sympathy, I shook Mr. Eolus's hand. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Eolus. I wish you good luck in the future with any new advertising technology."

After I left the store, I happened to pass by another venue still using the audio spotlight.

It was a branch of Blockbuster, and they were advertising a Tarantino film:

"Kill Bill, Kill Bill, Kill Bill...."

I hurried on.



"I'm the bluebird of happiness,
but I'm also qualified to prescribe drugs."

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Last year, while he was promoting the volume of Best American Short Stories *that he edited, Mr. King said that* F&SF *was "still the gold standard when it comes to short fiction in the United States." He then went on to admit that he had just added a story to our pile of submissions, so it was patently obvious he was just buttering up your ol' editor. Well, it worked. The flattery is the only reason this story appears in our pages. Forget that it's virtually a perfect execution of the sort of story at which* The Twilight Zone *excelled; we bought this one just because of the egoboo.*

Would-be authors seeking to gain their way into our pages by means of such flattery are advised to accompany their praise with stories that rival this one.

The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates

By Stephen King

SHE'S FRESH OUT OF THE shower when the phone begins to ring, but although the house is still full of relatives — she can hear them downstairs, it seems they will never go away, it seems she never had so many — no one picks up. Nor does the answering machine, as James programmed it to do after the fifth ring.

Anne goes to the extension on the bed-table, wrapping a towel around herself, her wet hair thwacking unpleasantly on the back of her neck and bare shoulders. She picks it up, she says hello, and then he says her name. It's James. They had thirty years together, and one word is all she needs. He says *Annie* like no one else, always did.

For a moment she can't speak or even breathe. He has caught her on the exhale and her lungs feel as flat as sheets of paper. Then, as he says her name again (sounding uncharacteristically hesitant and unsure of himself), the strength slips from her legs. They turn to sand and she sits on the bed, the towel falling off her, her wet bottom dampening the sheet beneath her. If the bed hadn't been there, she would have gone to the floor.

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Her teeth click together and that starts her breathing again.

"James? Where *are* you? *What happened*?" In her normal voice, this might have come out sounding shrewish — a mother scolding her wayward eleven-year-old who's come late to the supper-table yet again — but now it emerges in a kind of horrified growl. The murmuring relatives below her are, after all, planning his funeral.

James chuckles. It is a bewildered sound. "Well, I tell you what," he says. "I don't exactly know where I am."

Her first confused thought is that he must have missed the plane in London, even though he called her from Heathrow not long before it took off. Then a clearer idea comes: although both the *Times* and the TV news say there were no survivors, there was at least one. Her husband crawled from the wreckage of the burning plane (and the burning apartment building the plane hit, don't forget that, twenty-four more dead on the ground and the number apt to rise before the world moved on to the next tragedy) and has been wandering around Brooklyn ever since, in a state of shock.

"Jimmy, are you all right? Are you...are you burned?" The truth of what that would mean occurs after the question, thumping down with the heavy weight of a dropped book on a bare foot, and she begins to cry. "Are you in the hospital?"

"Hush," he says, and at his old kindness — and at that old word, just one small piece of their marriage's furniture — she begins to cry harder. "Honey, hush."

"But I don't *understand*!"

"I'm all right," he says. "Most of us are."

"Most — ? There are *others*?"

"Not the pilot," he says. "He's not so good. Or maybe it's the co-pilot. He keeps screaming, 'We're going down, there's no power, oh my God.' Also 'This isn't my fault, don't let them blame it on me.' He says that, too."

She's cold all over. "Who is this really? Why are you being so horrible? I just lost my husband, you asshole!"

"Honey — "

"Don't call me that!" There's a clear strand of mucus hanging from one of her nostrils. She wipes it away with the back of her hand and then

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flings it into the wherever, a thing she hasn't done since she was a child. "Listen, mister — I'm going to star-sixty-nine this call and the police will come and slam your ass...your ignorant, unfeeling *ass*...."

But she can go no further. It's his voice. There's no denying it. The way the call rang right through — no pick-up downstairs, no answering machine — suggests this call was just for her. And...*honey, hush*. Like in the old Carl Perkins song.

He has remained quiet, as if letting her work these things through for herself. But before she can speak again, there's a beep on the line.

"James? *Jimmy*? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, but I can't talk long. I was trying to call you when we went down, and I guess that's the only reason I was able to get through at all. Lots of others have been trying, we're lousy with cell phones, but no luck." That beep again. "Only now my phone's almost out of juice."

"Jimmy, did you know?" This idea has been the hardest and most terrible part for her — that he might have known, if only for an endless minute or two. Others might picture burned bodies or dismembered heads with grinning teeth; even light-fingered first responders filching wedding rings and diamond ear-clips, but what has robbed Annie Driscoll's sleep is the image of Jimmy looking out his window as the streets and cars and the brown apartment buildings of Brooklyn swell closer. The useless masks flopping down like the corpses of small yellow animals. The overhead bins popping open, carry-ons starting to fly, someone's Norelco razor rolling up the tilted aisle.

"Did you know you were going down?"

"Not really," he says. "Everything seemed all right until the very end — maybe the last thirty seconds. Although it's hard to keep track of time in situations like that, I always think."

Situations like that. And even more telling: *I always think.* As if he has been aboard half a dozen crashing 767s instead of just the one.

"In any case," he goes on, "I was just calling to say we'd be early, so be sure to get the FedEx man out of bed before I got there."

Her absurd attraction for the FedEx man has been a joke between them for years. She begins to cry again. His cell utters another of those beeps, as if scolding her for it.

"I think I died just a second or two before it rang the first time. I think

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that's why I was able to get through to you. But this thing's gonna give up the ghost pretty soon."

He chuckles as if this is funny. She supposes that in a way it is. She may see the humor in it herself, eventually. *Give me ten years or so*, she thinks.

Then, in that just-talking-to-myself voice she knows so well: "Why didn't I put the tiresome motherfucker on charge last night? Just forgot, that's all. Just forgot."

"James...honey...the plane crashed two days ago."

A pause. Mercifully with no beep to fill it. Then: "Really? Mrs. Corey *said* time was funny here. Some of us agreed, some of us disagreed. I was a disagreer, but looks like she was right."

"Hearts?" Annie asks. She feels now as if she is floating outside and slightly above her plump damp middle-aged body, but she hasn't forgotten Jimmy's old habits. On a long flight he was always looking for a game. Cribbage or canasta would do, but hearts was his true love.

"Hearts," he agrees. The phone beeps, as if seconding that.

"Jimmy...." She hesitates long enough to ask herself if this is information she really wants, then plunges with that question still unanswered. "Where *are* you, exactly?"

"Looks like Grand Central Station," he says. "Only bigger. And emptier. As if it wasn't really Grand Central at all but only...mmm...a movie set of Grand Central. Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"I...I think so...."

"There certainly aren't any trains...and we can't hear any in the distance...but there are doors going everywhere. Oh, and there's an escalator, but it's broken. All dusty, and some of the treads are gone." He pauses, and when he speaks again he does so in a lower voice, as if afraid of being overheard. "People are leaving. Some climbed the escalator — I saw them — but most are using the doors. I guess I'll have to leave, too. For one thing, there's nothing to eat. There's a candy machine, but that's broken, too."

"Are you...honey, are you hungry?"

"A little. Mostly what I'd like is some water. I'd *kill* for a cold bottle of Dasani."

Annie looks guiltily down at her own legs, still beaded with water.

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She imagines him licking off those beads and is horrified to feel a sexual stirring.

"I'm all right, though," he adds hastily. "For now, anyway. But there's no sense staying here. Only..."

"What? What, Jimmy?"

"I don't know which door to use."

Another beep.

"I wish I knew which one Mrs. Corey took. She's got my damn cards."

"Are you..." She wipes her face with the towel she wore out of the shower; then she was fresh, now she's all tears and snot. "Are you scared?"

"Scared?" he asks thoughtfully. "No. A little worried, that's all. Mostly about which door to use."

Find your way home, she almost says. *Find the right door and find your way home.* But if he did, would she want to see him? A ghost might be all right, but what if she opened the door on a smoking cinder with red eyes and the remains of jeans (he always traveled in jeans) melted into his legs? And what if Mrs. Corey was with him, his baked deck of cards in one twisted hand?

Beep.

"I don't need to tell you to be careful about the FedEx man anymore," he says. "If you really want him, he's all yours."

She shocks herself by laughing.

"But I did want to say I love you — "

"Oh honey I love you t — "

" — and not to let the McCormack kid do the gutters this fall, he works hard but he's a risk-taker, last year he almost broke his fucking neck. And don't go to the bakery anymore on Sundays. Something's going to happen there, and I know it's going to be on a Sunday, but I don't know which Sunday. Time really *is* funny here."

The McCormack kid he's talking about must be the son of the guy who used to be their caretaker in Vermont...only they sold that place ten years ago, and the kid must be in his mid-twenties by now. And the bakery? She supposes he's talking about Zoltan's, but what on *Earth* —

Beep.

"Some of the people here were on the ground, I guess. That's very tough, because they don't have a clue how they got here. And the pilot

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keeps screaming. Or maybe it's the co-pilot. I think he's going to be here for quite a while. He just wanders around. He's very confused."

The beeps are coming closer together now.

"I have to go, Annie. I can't stay here, and the phone's going to shit the bed any second now, anyway." Once more in that I'm-scolding-myself voice (impossible to believe she will never hear it again after today; impossible *not* to believe), he mutters, "It would have been so simple just to...well, never mind. I love you, sweetheart."

"Wait! Don't go!"

"I c — "

"I love you, too! Don't go!"

But he already has. In her ear there is only black silence.

She sits there with the dead phone to her ear for a minute or more, then breaks the connection. The non-connection. When she opens the line again and gets a perfectly normal dial-tone, she touches star-sixty-nine after all. According to the robot who answers her page, the last incoming call was at nine o'clock that morning. She knows who that one was: her sister Nell, calling from New Mexico. Nell called to tell Annie that her plane had been delayed and she wouldn't be in until tonight. Nell told her to be strong.

All the relatives who live at a distance — James's, Annie's — flew in. Apparently they feel that James used up all the family's Destruction Points, at least for the time being.

There is no record of an incoming call at — she glances at the bedside clock and sees it's now 3:17 PM — at about ten past three, on the third afternoon of her widowhood.

Someone raps briefly on the door and her brother calls, "Anne? Annie?"

"Dressing!" she calls back. Her voice sounds like she's been crying, but unfortunately, no one in this house would find that strange. "Privacy, please!"

"You okay?" he calls through the door. "We thought we heard you talking. And Ellie thought she heard you call out."

"Fine!" she calls, then wipes her face again with the towel. "Down in a few!"

"Okay. Take your time." Pause. "We're here for you." Then he clumps away.

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"Beep," she whispers, then covers her mouth to hold in laughter that is some emotion even more complicated than grief trying to find the only way out it has. "Beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep." She lies back on the bed, laughing, and above her cupped hands her eyes are large and awash with tears that overspill down her cheeks and run all the way to her ears. "Beep-fucking-beepity-beep."

She laughs for quite a while, then dresses and goes downstairs to be with her relatives, who have come to mingle their grief with hers. Only they feel apart from her, because he didn't call any of them. He called her. For better or worse, he called her.

DURING THE AUTUMN of that year, with the blackened remains of the apartment building the jet crashed into still closed off from the rest of the world by yellow police tape (although the taggers have been inside, one leaving a spray-painted message reading CRISPY CRITTERS LAND HERE), Annie receives the sort of e-blast computer-addicts like to send to a wide circle of acquaintances. This one comes from Gert Fisher, the town librarian in Tilton, Vermont. When Annie and James summered there, Annie used to volunteer at the library, and although the two women never got on especially well, Gert has included Annie in her quarterly updates ever since. They are usually not very interesting, but halfway through the weddings, funerals, and 4-H winners in this one, Annie comes across a bit of news that makes her catch her breath. Jason McCormack, the son of old Hughie McCormack, was killed in an accident on Labor Day. He fell from the roof of a summer cottage while cleaning the gutters and broke his neck.

"He was only doing a favor for his dad, who as you may remember had a stroke the year before last," Gert wrote before going on to how it rained on the library's end-of-summer lawn sale, and how disappointed they all were.

Gert doesn't say in her three-page compendium of breaking news, but Annie is quite sure Jason fell from the roof of what used to be their cottage. In fact, she is positive.

Five years after the death of her husband (and the death of Jason McCormack not long after), Annie remarries. And although they relocate

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to Boca Raton, she gets back to the old neighborhood often. Craig, the new husband, is only semi-retired, and his business takes him to New York every three or four months. Annie almost always goes with him, because she still has family in Brooklyn and on Long Island. More than she knows what to do with, it sometimes seems. But she loves them with that exasperated affection that seems to belong, she thinks, only to people in their fifties and sixties. She never forgets how they drew together for her after James's plane went down, and made the best cushion for her that they could. So she wouldn't crash, too.

When she and Craig go back to New York, they fly. About this she never has a qualm, but she stops going to Zoltan's Family Bakery on Sundays when she's home, even though their raisin bagels are, she is sure, served in heaven's waiting room. She goes to Froger's instead. She is actually there, buying doughnuts (the doughnuts are at least passable), when she hears the blast. She hears it clearly even though Zoltan's is eleven blocks away. LP gas explosion. Four killed, including the woman who always passed Annie her bagels with the top of the bag rolled down, saying, "Keep it that way until you get home or you lose the freshness."

People stand on the sidewalks, looking east toward the sound of the explosion and the rising smoke, shading their eyes with their hands. Annie hurries past them, not looking. She doesn't want to see a plume of rising smoke after a big bang; she thinks of James enough as it is, especially on the nights when she can't sleep. When she gets home she can hear the phone ringing inside. Either everyone has gone down the block to where the local school is having a sidewalk art sale, or no one can hear that ringing phone. Except for her, that is. And by the time she gets her key turned in the lock, the ringing has stopped.

Sarah, the only one of her sisters who never married, *is* there, it turns out, but there is no need to ask her why she didn't answer the phone; Sarah Bernicke, the one-time disco queen, is in the kitchen with the Village People turned up, dancing around with the O-Cedar in one hand, looking like a chick in a TV ad. She missed the bakery explosion, too, although their building is even closer to Zoltan's than Froger's.

Annie checks the answering machine, but there's a big red zero in the MESSAGES WAITING window. That means nothing in itself, lots of people call without leaving a message, but —

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Star-sixty-nine reports the last call at eight-forty last night. Annie dials it anyway, hoping against hope that somewhere outside the big room that looks like a Grand Central Station movie set he found a place to recharge his phone. To him it might seem he last spoke to her yesterday. Or only minutes ago. *Time is funny here,* he said. She has dreamed of that call so many times it now almost seems like a dream itself, but she has never told anyone about it. Not Craig, not even her own mother, now almost ninety but alert and with a firmly held belief in the afterlife.

In the kitchen, the Village People advise that there is no need to feel down. There isn't, and she doesn't. She nevertheless holds the phone very tightly as the number she has star-sixty-nined rings once, then twice. Annie stands in the living room with the phone to her ear and her free hand touching the brooch above her left breast, as if touching the brooch could still the pounding heart beneath it. Then the ringing stops and a recorded voice offers to sell her *The New York Times* at special bargain rates that will not be repeated.

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In the checkered course of his writing career, Scott Bradfield has done a lot to support his habit of writing short stories...and that includes some work in Hollywood. Companies like Sony, Universal, Working Title, and even Roger Corman's Concorde Films have benefited from his scripts (both original and rewrites). Mr. Bradfield says that none of those experiences are reflected in this new story, not in the least bit. Uh uh.

Mr. Bradfield's most recent books include the novel Good Girl Wants It Bad *and the story collection* Hot Animal Love *(which includes two other stories about Dazzle). His recent stories and articles have appeared in* Bookforum, thefanzine.com, *and* The New York Ghost. *He also says he recently got a dog, but he hates story notes that tell the readership all about the author's pets.*

He did, however, assure us that his new pet is not named Dazzle.

Dazzle Joins the Screenwriter's Guild

By Scott Bradfield

DAZZLE FOUND HIS FIRST script conference a lot less painful than he expected.

"I see a dog with severe personality disorders," envisioned Syd Fleishman of Sony Tristar, seated in his overstuffed leather armchair with a plastic liter of Evian propped between his knees. "I see a dog with closeness issues, and issues about his dad. I see a dog with lots to say about the terrible problems facing mankind — such as the destruction of the ozone layer and the rainforests, and the tragedy of Native Americans and all that. But I also see a dog that, well. If he spots a human being in trouble? That dog comes running. An all-faithful sort of dog, but an all-faithful sort of dog with *attitude*. You gotta *earn* the respect of a dog like that. But once you earn that respect, he's your buddy for life."

Syd was flanked by the Head of Creative Development and the Vice-Head of Corporate Production. Dazzle couldn't remember the names of either of these high-flying, barely post-graduate executives, but throughout the entire forty-five-minute conference nobody let him forget for one second that the CEO's name was Syd.

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"It's a bold new animal movie for a bold new millennium, *Syd*," piped up the Head of Creative Development.

"It's got heart, *Syd*. It's got action. And what's more," interjected the Vice Head of Corporate Production, "it's got abstract topicality. Abstract topicality, see, is this term I kind of invented."

Dazzle was leafing through a telephone-book-sized legal contract. The redacted passages alone were terrifying in their opaqueness.

"Kind of like Capra or Spielberg," continued the Vice Head, even though everybody had already stopped listening. "You know, like stuff that *seems* to be about current affairs? But once you look closely, it's not about anything at all."

This particular lull wasn't on the morning agenda.

"Any questions?" Syd asked, getting to his feet. It was the only appointment that Syd was never late for: lunch.

Dazzle took this opportunity to gesture at the as-yet unsigned contract with a flaky forepaw.

"Look, Syd. I've been reading through this rancid sack of worms, and if you don't mind my asking, I'm still hazy on a couple details."

Syd, frozen in an attitude of benign departure, smiled stiffly.

"What a cute little doggy," whispered the Head of Creative Development. She looked about nineteen years old. "He wants to discuss his contract. He wants to be part of the legal process, too."

Three sets of executive eyes, Dazzle thought. And once they start exchanging ironic, bemused glances, it's impossible to tell them apart.

"As I understand it," Dazzle went on, "you guys *aren't* trying to produce a major motion picture based on my life. Rather you're buying the rights, and I quote, 'to develop a long-running, multi-format entertainment entity based on the [possibly fictive] events and characters inspired by the legally recognized intellectual-commodity-unit known as Dazzle.' Which leaves me wondering, guys — why so much trouble and expense? Why not just make up your own character and call him, oh, like Harry the dog, or Bozo the cat or something. Then you could 'develop' any damn thing you pleased, and you wouldn't have to pay me anything, or negotiate so many clause-belaboring details with my annoying agent. I may be a dog, guys, but that doesn't make me stupid. All I'm asking is what could I

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possibly possess that you guys can't invent for yourselves? Give it to me straight, *Syd*. I really want to know."

Syd was smiling at the memory of something he had once said, or a person he used to be. It was a self-enclosed, inviolate sort of smile. He didn't have to share it with anybody.

"That's simple, Daz. You got the only thing money can't buy in this town."

Dazzle waited. So did everybody else.

"Authenticity," Syd said.

And left the building.

According to *The Who's Who Hollywood Guide to Selling Your First Screenplay*, Fred Prescott had won an Oscar during the Eisenhower administration for his collaborative work on some long-forgotten skirt-and-sandal biopic, and his consequent A-list status had kept him going through lean years and fat. But his work habits were rudimentary; he lacked even the crudest of social graces; and most mornings, his biggest achievement seemed to be dragging his sorry butt out of bed for black coffee and a cinnamon bagel.

"You can't make a whore of Lady Inspiration," Fred often said. "You can only leave the front door open and hope she stops by for a while. Never sweat art, Daz-baby. That's rule numero uno at the House of Fred."

Dazzle, who had never stared into the eyes of a looming contract deadline before, couldn't quite adopt Fred's free and easy manner. He knew it made him sound pro-establishment; he just couldn't help himself.

"I'm not saying we should make a whore of Lady Inspiration, Fred," Dazzle explained in his most laid-back, diplomatic manner. "I'm just saying it's been three weeks, and we don't have a title, or a two sentence plot summary. Just that rather vague opening scene in the garbage dump with two topless teenagers, which you say is modeled on Italian what?"

"Post-war existential nouvelle-vague," Fred said sharply, giving Dazzle a slow once over, like a school guard scanning for concealed weaponry. "Are you saying you've never heard of Antonioni, pooch? What sort of writing partner did they saddle me with, anyway?"

The funniest thing about movie people, Dazzle thought, was that no matter how laid back they *pretended* to be, their fuses were always

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incredibly short. It was as if Dazzle had to apologize constantly for all the things they *thought* he said.

"I'm not saying I don't *like* the garbage dump scene, Fred. In fact, I probably like the garbage dump scene a lot. I just don't think it's enough material to deliver to Sony after six weeks' work. It might need, you know. A little embellishment."

It was like prodding an open wound.

"So you want to *embellish* our natural-birth baby, is that it? Like wrap it up in pretty bows and whatnot and shoot fireworks out its ass? Why don't *you*, a first-timer who struck it lucky, explain the business to *me*, the Oscar winning sole-credited story-designer of *Solon the Magnificent, War Bond Baby*, and the recently rediscovered 'AMC forgotten comedy-classic,' *I Can't Stop Dancing!* Maybe *I* need an introductory scriptwriting lesson from a dickless wonder like yourself."

By this point, the remains of Fred's cinnamon bagel were starting to look pretty tempting, causing Dazzle's tail to thump impatiently at the polished hardwood floor. But then, so did the long blue beach extending beyond the smudgy picture window, and the endless California summer filled with leathery-skinned, once-attractive people playing volleyball and frisbee golf.

In his long and shaggy life, Dazzle had never actually explored Zuma.

But maybe it was high time he did.

DAZZLE WAS RETURNING from his second or third walk of the morning when it came time to pay that morning's piper.

"Hi, Daz. Got Syd, Steve, and Becky on the line. Put 'em through?"

Dazzle wished he had never learned how to work the speaker phone in Fred's cluttered office. He could feel his heart sinking when he replied, "Sure, I guess." Then counted to three, four.

"Daz, honey!"

"Dazzy-sweetheart!"

"How's it hanging, hot stuff! You got our through-line yet? You ready to pitch this mother to the assholes upstairs?"

It was always more enthusiasm — and coming at him from more

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directions — than Dazzle could handle. Especially since Dazzle had never been what you might call an optimistic or forward-yearning sort of dog.

"It's, well, yeah," Dazzle said slowly, as if he were trying to lick a burr from his coat. "We're, you know. Really making progress and all that."

At which point, Dazzle permitted himself a hasty glance out the buggy window at Fred, who was sleeping off his third breakfast Margarita in the patio hammock.

"We're working out a few kinks, and developing the, what-do-you-call-it, the plot or something. And of course the central character — that is, *me* — he's getting more interesting by the minute. Hell, even *I'm* beginning to like him."

A long corporate hush emerged from the telephone receiver like a voice from beyond the grave.

"Wow," it breathed.

"Cool."

"'Bitchin' ' — I mean, that is, if you don't mind me using the word 'bitchin'.' Is that okay with you, Dazzle-babe?"

There was so little you had to do to please these people, Dazzle thought.

"Absolutely fine," Dazzle said. "In fact, under these circumstances? 'Bitchin''s like the most perfect word there is."

"The only freedom you ever really enjoy in this business," Fred liked to remind Dazzle, "is during the always-blissful period when nobody knows what you're doing. And the *longer* they don't know, the more freedom you've got. So here's how I interpret this contractual 'delivery calendar' you're so worked up about, Daz, and it goes like this. Sign the contract, get the bucks, and enjoy freedom freedom freedom, birdies singing, tra-la-la-la, la-la-la-*laaah*. Then *deliver* the pages, receive your delivery check, and it goes like this — hassle hassle hassle, mega-hassle mega-hassle, mini-hassles ad infinitum, talk talk talk, hassle hassle hassle. From the moment you give them what they *say* they want — which is the goddamn script they don't know what to do with — they'll be climbing up and down it like they've found themselves a new asshole. They'll turn it upside down and every which way. They'll schedule conference calls and studio meets, and before you know it, you'll have

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execs calling you from fucking Afghanistan and Tamaleland and places you never even knew existed, and they'll *all* be telling you what to do and how to do it. So stop worrying, my obedient little doggy. Chill out, enjoy the sea-breeze, and share some of these canned martinis. They're better than they look."

It was very annoying of Fred, Dazzle thought, to act as if *he* were some sort of "obedient" little doggy, when all he wanted to do was get the studio execs off his back. It was especially irksome that Fred did it with such eloquence and conviction.

"I'm not trying to sound like Mr. Obedient," Dazzle countered wearily. "I'm just trying to do the right thing. These jokers paid us a bundle, Fred. And we *did* agree to start delivering pages by, well, last month or something. *I* know they're jokers, and *you* know they're jokers, and believe me, I'm hip to the whole 'stop and smell the roses' philosophy. But you're not the guy who answers the phone around here. In case you forgot, these people are incredibly persistent. And to be fair, shouldn't we at least have a title by now? Or some minimal idea of the whaddayoucallit? The narrative arc?"

But of course Fred had already passed out in the hammock, the warm dented can of Make-U-Mix Chilled Martinis cradled against his chest like a begging cup.

It was so Fred, Dazzle thought. You couldn't help but like him.

Dazzle loved the beach. He loved the salty sand between his toe-pads, and the distant tease and crash of rubber-clad, seal-like surfers frolicking in the waves. He especially loved the air that felt both clean and astringent, as if the sea weren't simply providing an alternative to city soot, but was actually scrubbing away its residue, like swarms of hungry, eco-conscious animalculae. It was the perfect place for people without jobs, Dazzle thought.

"Like hey there, doggy-dude! How's the creativity thing going? You should find a wet suit with four little doggy legs and I'll teach you to surf."

Diggy Bop was scrubbing his chapped, freckly face with waxy sunscreen and sucking diet soda from a can. At various times in their conversations, he had claimed to hail from the midwest, the east coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and even the former Republic of Sudan, but most of the

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local surfers knew him as a native Whittier boy, born and bred. It was one of the few qualities Dazzle had learned to respect in these otherwise-unpalatable human biped types — the capacity to dissemble. The alternative seemed to be human beings who were perfectly happy with who they were.

Yuck, Dazzle thought.

Dazzle sat down to rest beside Diggy Bop's stash of sandy boards and crumpled wet suits. "I'm afraid it's not going well at all," Dazzle conceded. "And to be perfectly frank, I don't think my so-called writing partner's giving it his best shot. All we seem to do is lie around the house watching TV."

Diggy Bop was looking at the vast Pacific. He had just finished his soda.

"Sometimes a guy's gotta wait for weeks to know what he's waiting *for*," Diggy said softly. "A girl, a wave, an inspiration, you name it. You can't go looking for it. It can only come looking for you."

At which point Diggy scooped up his board and sprinted toward a whitecap forming in the blue distance. Diggy wasn't much of a talker, Dazzle conceded. He was more of a doer.

And thank God for that, Dazzle thought.

By the time late afternoon came around, Dazzle had usually given up on receiving any help from Oscar-winning screenwriter and former Writer's Guild Assistant Secretary Fred Prescott, so he ventured alone into Fred's messy office and stared at the antique, dusty Selectric for a while. It was a peculiar, dense little machine with a revolving print-ball that Dazzle found infinitely amusing. What he didn't find amusing, however, was the alert thrum and snap the machine emitted whenever he activated the black power button, as if it had been waiting all morning for Dazzle to show up.

And now it was time for Dazzle to deliver the goods.

ACT I, Dazzle would type clumsily with his stubby, inarticulate forepaw. SCENE 1. DAZZLE ENTERS. DAZZLE SPEAKS.

It was as far as Dazzle's imagination ever took him. Perhaps because the subject that least interested Dazzle was himself.

Dog meets bitch, Dazzle thought, recalling a notorious Faulknerian parable. Dog loses bitch. Dog finds bitch again.

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Coming soon to a theater near you.

But sometimes, things don't tie up in a pretty little bow with appropriate theme music, Dazzle thought. Life just unravels until there's nothing left.

So then Dazzle deployed all of his worst narrative instincts. He thought about stupid movies he'd seen featuring big name stars grimacing in tight close-ups on multi-media-formatable movie posters. Like a grizzly, Bruce Willis sort of dog, with a flamethrower strapped to its back. Or a telegenic dog who plays basketball. He toyed with ideas of a precognitive dog, a flying dog, and a dog who saved children from imminent catastrophes. But try as he might, Dazzle couldn't get his creative juices flowing. And no matter how long he sat there trying to appease the hungry Selectric, he never once progressed beyond the same unhappy phrases:

DAZZLE ENTERS. DAZZLE SPEAKS.

Dazzle wished, Dazzle thought.

"Speak!" he told the Selectric. "Open your stupid maw and let it out!"

But, of course, machines don't talk. And dogs don't talk. Only human beings talk.

And that, in terms of Hollywood-style creative development, was the rub.

THE ONLY TIME Dazzle actually *liked* to hear the phone ring was when he sat down to do the work he couldn't do. Which was why he was always so quick to activate the desktop speaker — and utter the only word he could usually muster:

"Woof."

It didn't sound right even to Dazzle.

"Wow, Dad. You just fall out of the hammock or something? It's me, Benny. Your kid. Remember?"

It was the sort of voice Dazzle was accustomed to having directed his way. Short, curt sentences without modifiers. Simple animal expressions of calm and appeasement.

"Woof," Dazzle replied. "Woof woof."

"Gotcha, Dad. Know you're busy, just wanted to make sure you

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hadn't killed yourself with those damn TV dinners you're always stuffing down. Too bad I don't have any Hollywood connections. Maybe then I'd be worth your while for lunch or coffee or something. Or maybe even some minimally polite interpersonal conversation."

Click.

It was a lot of unlived life to live with, Dazzle thought, gazing out the window at somnolent Fred in his hammock, hearing the dial tone recommence like an endless, audible ellipsis. Three divorces, four angrily neglected kids, seven undelivered scripts, a pending mega-deal at Paramount, and an irate Colombian lover with her own dry-cleaning service in Sepulveda. No wonder Fred got up so early each morning. It took a lot of time to get your head around doing so little.

You can't outlive bad karma like this guy's got, Dazzle thought.

You could only arrange to fall fast asleep before it came knocking.

Unlike pages, the weeks were mounting up. And whenever Dazzle felt especially panicky about his contractual responsibilities, he called his agent.

"You got five minutes," Bunny said, her voice a deep echoing mine of patience with itself. "You speak and I'll listen. Shoot."

Bunny started off every conversation as if it were a race between Dazzle and her preconceptions about him. A race, of course, that Dazzle was always destined to lose.

"Oh, well," Dazzle muttered slowly. "Nothing new, really. I'm just getting nervous. We don't seem to be making any progress. And I don't mean to sound judgmental, but it's all Fred's fault. I was never born to write, Bunny. I'm just a goddamn dog. But Fred hasn't lifted a finger, and I think he may be burned out or something. So this is what I was thinking. Maybe we could just, you know, give them their money back, and I could go home to Big Sur. I'd even be willing to surrender all my rights to, you know, my life and identity. Really, I don't mind. Money's never mattered to me; basically, I'm happy with a few berries and wild mushrooms and a splash of clear spring water when I need it. I want my old life back, even if I don't own the rights to it anymore. So what do you say, Bunny? We tear up the contract, Sony brings in another, as they like to call it, 'creative team.' And we all go our separate ways."

Bunny's silence was potent enough to frost glass.

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"Look, Daz-baby. We got you paid, right?"

"Well, yeah," Dazzle conceded. "But — "

"And now you're working with one of the most venerable and widely respected scriptwriters in the profession, right?"

"Sure, if you want to call Fred *venerable*, Bunny. It's just that — "

"So let me say one last thing, and listen to me good. I'd tear off my left tit before I gave Sony back a dime. I'd even tear off *your* balls, if you had any. So get back to work, and call me when you're ready to deliver. Otherwise, I'll turn you into the dog pound so fast it'll make your head spin. No offense, Darling. But I'm making you a Hollywood success story or my name ain't Bunny Fairchild."

It was like living with plutonium, Dazzle thought. The unwritten script emitted black radiance through every room in the house.

"I don't think you appreciate who you're working with," Diggy often told him, as they exchanged lukewarm cans of Coors over a sputtering, illegal campfire. "That's Fred Prescott on your team. He's like a filmic genius or something. He's like the only soulful person in the entire Hollywood community. Why, a list of all the great movies he *could* have made would astound Michelangelo — at least that's how Fred tells it. Like his totally disrespected seven-hundred-page film treatment for *Finnegans Wake* starring Nick Nolte — *that* got totally dissed by the powers-that-be. Or what about Fred's genre-bending concept about a boxing promoter on Mars? That got totally crummed on, too. Whenever the suits want to pretend they're artists, they hire Fred Prescott for a draft or two, and pat themselves on the back all over Rodeo Drive. Then they turn every script he delivers into a vehicle of mush for Hugh Grant and Drew Barrymore. But Fred endures the toil and struggle, Daz. He marches to the beat of his own drum. Give the guy a chance, and before this job's done? He's gonna teach you bozos what art is all about."

Dazzle wanted to believe Diggy — and in Diggy's vision of Fred. But the only way to believe in Fred was to disregard the daily pageant of shame and desuetude that constituted his "routine."

Art is never easy, Dazzle conceded. Maybe, just maybe, Fred knew what he was doing.

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"Hey there, Daz baby. Stu Sanderson at Sony. Would you pick up the phone, Daz? We know you're in there. And we're totally sympathetic to your creative needs as an artist. But we really *gotta* touch base with you on one or two important concept points before we forget them. Isn't that what writing's about, Daz-baby? Writing down every little detail and pawing over it endlessly in high-power executive lunchrooms? Sally, have you got the concept points we discussed at yesterday's meeting? I need to read them to Daz here...Okay, point one — we need humor. Got that? It has to have *some* humor, Daz, but not *too much* humor, because comedy's not our department, but a *little* humor's okay, and actually pretty necessary, especially when it comes to talking dogs. Get me? Point two — and this is a little something Syd and I developed in our meeting with Roger last week — Daz is a dog, but he acts more like a cat. How do you like that one? Syd and I came up with that by ourselves. He's sort of a cat-like dog, with all these feline needs and desires and so forth, the audience will really eat it up. Like he digs catnip or something, or peeing in kitty litter — I'll leave the gory details to you creative types. We did this survey, or somebody heard about this survey, we're pretty sure a survey was done anyway, that says people are either cat people or dog people, and doing a dog movie alienates the cat-viewership and vice versa. So this way, we appeal to *every possible demographic*. We could sign any A-list director with a concept point like this one, Daz. You and Fred need to incorporate it into your treatment right away."

As Dazzle grew less concerned about their long-broken contract deadlines, Fred slowly awakened from his stupor like a bewitched maiden in a castle. Some days, he even ventured out of his hammock before noon, and could be found browsing yesterday's sun-stained *Los Angeles Times* on the sun deck, or shoveling through a plate of Maria's huevos rancheros while tapping a pencil against a tablet of yellow fine-lined legal stationery. When he felt unusually perky, he cranked up his old LP-player and treated the beach-side sun worshipers to a mega-decibel-blast of Stan Getz being mellow, or Paul Desmond pouring cool hi-fi martinis. It was like watching a space captain emerge from suspended animation, Dazzle thought. He was still groggy and blood-sore. He couldn't quite work his lips.

"Hey, Fred," Dazzle would say as he padded to the kitchen, where

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Maria would stop brushing cobwebs off the ceiling with a damp mop, waddle to the stove, and happily scoop Dazzle's favorite lunch from a simmering pot: soft-shelled chicken tortillas with extra hot salsa and sour cream.

"Mucho bueno, Señor Perrocito," Maria liked to say, scratching between his ears, just the way Dazzle liked it. "Escribir con Señor Fred es muy difícil, no?"

Meanwhile, Fred examined the tip of his yellow Ticonderoga pencil with a piercing, level-headed gaze.

"The first thing you've got to do is walk away from what the world keeps telling you," Fred announced softly. "Like a penny saved is a penny earned, that sort of crap. Or how better mousetraps are always the rage, and the world will beat a path to your door. You don't need to be human to recognize human turds when you smell them, right, pooch? You just gotta clear your mind of all distractions and think for yourself."

"We're not trying to 'hound' you, Daz-honey. Get it? We're not trying to *hound* you?"

"We're just worried about the, you know, legal implications of all these delays and binding contractual clauses and modifying clauses which, you know, we can't just keep modifying like this. Unless there's an act of God or something."

"Nobody'd *hound* you, Daz-baby. *If* it was an act of God — "

"But we need *words*, sweetheart. We need some — I know you hate this word — but we need some *pages*. Syd isn't the most patient chief executive in town, but he's not the *least* patient either. He's just doing his job, Daz. And whether you like it or not, we're just doing ours."

"We've got families to support."

"We've got wives, ex-wives, ex-semi-permanent live-in love-mates, and so forth. We're as human as the next guy. Which isn't to cast any aspersions on *you*, Daz-baby. It's just an expression is all."

"Can we at least drive out and have a little meet at Cross Creek or something. We can watch Goldy play with her grandkids. You could show us some rough thoughts on a napkin and talk us through. You don't even have to tell Fred. It'll be *our* little secret."

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"We could buy you a nice big bowl of naturally carbonated spring water. Or maybe a beer."

"And you could tell us, right, Daz-baby? You could finally tell us what this movie we're making is all about."

DAZZLE KNEW HIS DAYS of Hollywood fame were numbered, so he tried to close the door securely on his way out. He instructed his accountant to dump his earnings into a series of 501(k)s and offshore investments. He set up a trust fund for his ever-widening (and increasingly errant) canine family back in Big Sur, and arranged a lump sum guaranteed annuity with a Hartford insurance firm. He gave himself a flea bath, had his nails clipped at the canine beautician's, and even endured what he hoped would be his last-ever full-body upper and lower GI polyp-palpating exam at the local vet, who turned out to be a well-groomed man in his mid-fifties named Dr. Leroy Ferguson.

"I guess I moved here in the late sixties and never looked back," Dr. Ferguson confessed, as he gently posed and reposed Dazzle through a panoply of the usual indignities. "Where I came from, back in Ohio? We had nothing more interesting to do all day than go to the Laundromat or visit the bank. Farmers would sit in Bob's Big Boy complaining about their stock, or some leaky roof. And on your first (and often only) date, you drove to the woods in your third-hand car, got laid, got your girlfriend pregnant, and got unhappily married, not necessarily in that order. Personally, my only viable career choice was to become either a mortgage broker or a vet, and being a vet meant nothing but performing livestock viral exams and animal husbandry. You wouldn't see a decent doggy or kitty for weeks at a time. You were too busy driving across Farmer Brown's scrub-strewn land in a truck. But then I got crazy and came to California, where everything was different. Suddenly, I was living with movie stars. I was spaying and neutering full-blooded manxes and Siameses and even, I swear to god, an actual declawed leopard from Borneo once. And now my life is like a beautiful movie. I walk on the beach every morning, my kids go to great schools and get married to entertainment lawyers and software executives, and my third wife, Patty, wow. She's got tits out to here and they're almost all hers. I have never felt more fulfilled

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as a veterinary surgeon and animal health-care worker in my life, and my golf swing, Jesus. I'm knocking seagulls out of the air with my seven iron. I've gotten that good."

Even the doctor's hands, while they probed Dazzle's weary orifices, exuded confidence. It was like visiting one of those Shiatsu places at the mall. And when it was over, and he was gently lifted down from the paper-shielded metal table by a pair of bountiful young starlet-like nurses, Dazzle felt like a million bucks.

"I've just never met so many happy people in my life," Dazzle told Diggy over chocolatey cappuccinos at one of the Cross Creek picnic tables. "It's not like I pictured at all. I'd sort of expected some sunny den of despair, where everybody's constantly enraged by the bastards who screwed them over on the last project that fell through. But when you look at Malibu for what it is, everybody has so much free time. Their nannies are taking care of the kids, their administrative assistants are answering the phones, and most of the time, all these people do is wander around clothing outlets, drive back and forth to Blockbuster, and eat lunch. In fact, now that I think of it, I hardly see any signs of depravity whatsoever, even from the sixty-year-old guys with twenty-something wives. They seem just as boring as everybody else. Except, of course, that they have a lot more money to be boring with."

But as Dazzle had learned from a lifetime of pissing on the lampposts of polite society, he always spoke way too soon. And the moment Diggy dropped him off at Fred's, he encountered a fleet of chickens coming home to roost simultaneously. These particular chickens were driving Arnold Schwarzenegger-style "energy-efficient" retooled Humvees, decked out PT Cruisers, and four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles thumping with Wagner, Patti Smith, and mid-seventies progressive rock.

"We know you're in there, Pop!" shouted a twenty-something version of Fred in a linen sport coat and Levi's. His features were so well tended that they seemed shellacked. "You shut down, passive-aggressive, family-abandoning old hack! The worst part about hating guys like you, Dad, is that you never even show your face, or give us a chance to make fun of that hypocritical sixties getup you wear! And then to hear you spouting all that outdated bullshit about marching to your own drum and beautifying the

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muse, Jesus! It makes me want to puke! You practically ruined my life, Dad! And if Mom hadn't met that property developer in Pasadena, you'd have ruined her life, too!"

The fleet of well-mobilized chickens represented the depth and breadth of middle-aged, middle-income California rage. Some of it, like Fred Junior's, had been fanned into a hot flame by years of assertiveness training and self-actualization therapy. But some of it had been twisted into bizarrely serene, flowery zen-like shapes by inner tranquility regimens and TM.

(To Dazzle's way of thinking, this second type of rage was the most frightening type of rage in the world.)

"We just stopped by to see how you're doing," Syd Fleishman said gently, flanked by various development heads. "We're not like these other people. We're here to *help*. Maybe you'd be so kind as to let us in, Fred, and we could share some of our disillusioning experiences with the corporate entertainment industry. And then, you know, if you felt like it. Maybe you could show us some of the, ahem, you know. Some of the — "

"Chinga tu madre!" shouted the hot little Colombian woman in a low-slung white cotton blouse and tight-fitting lime-green toreador pants. She was shaking a large loose pallet of ironed white shirts on a set of clattering wire coat hangers. "Take your dry cleaning and shove it straight up your butt, Fred Prescott! Screw you and your creative thought process — you miserable queer without balls!"

It was terrible, Dazzle thought, how bad karma could just come revving into your driveway like this. It always seemed to know exactly where you lived.

"You owe us for five months' of gardening, Señor Piss-artist!"

"You stole my action concept at a Sizzler restaurant in Tustin, you lazy old ponce!"

"I bore you three children, listened to your endless pronouncements about art and liberty and beauty, and when it came to the settlement, you screwed me so bad I could hardly afford new sprinklers for the yard!"

"We only want to *share* the burden of creative development, Fred! We're not like all those *other* men in suits! We're here to help you make the most of your dreams and ambitions!"

Jesus Christ on a crutch, Dazzle thought. If life was a choice between

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these awful people and that filthy hammock, I'd probably be swinging my flea-bitten haunch into that hammock right now.

Then, as if a tiny displacement had occurred in the atmosphere, the entire crowd of belligerent shouters went totally quiet. And everybody blinked simultaneously at Fred's snail-tracked blue front door.

And watched the door open slightly — and a pale hand extrude, depositing a yellow foolscap legal pad on the thick brown horsehair doormat.

The door closed again. And like one thinking, feeling organism, everybody looked directly at Dazzle.

It took Dazzle a moment to catch up with all the attention. Then, once he caught his breath, he spoke the only word he had in him.

"Woof." Dazzle shrugged sheepishly. "Like what did you expect me to say?"

As if they were drawing a line with a laser, the crowd's attention moved slowly from Dazzle to the sheet of yellow foolscap paper on the doormat. And when they spoke, they spoke through one individual at a time.

"Who's the dog?"

"El perro es muy exacerbating."

"I told you I smelled something special about that mutt. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'm pretty sure I like it."

"I didn't even know Dad had a dog. All my life, as a kid, I'm begging for a dog. But he never gets one until I'm already grown up."

Feeling self-conscious, Dazzle trotted across the brown lawn, picked up the legal pad with his teeth (he hated when dogs did stuff like this), trotted over with apparent dutifulness to Syd Fleishman of Sony Pictures Tristar, Inc., and laid it down at his feet.

"I think," Dazzle said humbly, "that this may be what you came for."

The suits separated from the crowd like the yolk from an egg.

"What's it say?"

"It's definitely Fred's handwriting. But it's too hard to read."

"That's a t and that's an h and that there — "

"Through-line. It says through-line. And that right after that. It's a date."

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Then Syd came forward — pushing everyone out of his way.

"I pay you guys to think and you can't even *read*." He held up the yellow legal pad like Moses carrying tablets down from the mountain. And then he told everybody what it said.

> *Cool dog. Cool guy. Buddy pic. Big shots get thrown out of buildings, set on fire, the works. Politically conscious, eco-wary, funny with a heart. Explosive finale, two week pre-opening ad campaign on VH-1, Family Network and Animal Planet. 60 mill opening* — secure.

It was as if the entire crowd of gang-haters gasped at once. Everybody waited for somebody to say something. Finally, somebody did.

"You're the fucking *man*," Syd whispered under his breath, holding the sheet of yellow foolscap in the air like an Olympic torch.

And slowly, like a chant, the entire crowd began whispering it too.

"It's like I always said," Dazzle explained to Diggy, on the day he was dropped off at the Burbank Greyhound station. "I'm not cut out for the writerly life. I don't have creative genes or something. The worrisome part is that I don't even *recognize* a decent writer when I meet one. Seriously, I had Fred pegged as a tiresome old hack with delusions of grandeur, but what do I know? Now, without any help from me (his supposed *inspiration*) he's taken our script to 'the next level,' as Stu put it. They're bringing in six-figure rewrite teams. They're coordinating tri-agency talent deals to develop, cross-market, and cast. And the concept's so hot it's being passed around at pool parties and Bar Mitzvahs, and all I ever did was answer the phone, lie to people I didn't know, and walk on the beach."

Diggy's car was littered with fast food wrappers, expired bottles of sunscreen, and yellowing dead-winged pages of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Coast Mall Shopper*. You could perform a fairly accurate sociological survey in this screwy Toyota, Dazzle thought. The ratio of fast-food franchises to miles driven by the average surfer, or something totally useless like that.

"I told you, Daz. Fred doesn't compromise, dig? He remains like totally faithful to his beautiful muse."

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It was the smoggiest day Dazzle could remember, and the funny thing was? It had never looked more beautiful or benign. Pink and orange and purplish clouds rimmed the horizon, like one of those multi-layer liqueur-cocktails served as lady-drinks in phony, overpriced west side bars.

"Yeah, well, maybe you're right, Diggy," Dazzle concluded wistfully. "And I'll definitely never remember good old Fred without smiling. What a life. What a profession. I guess somebody's got to do it. I'm just glad it's not me."

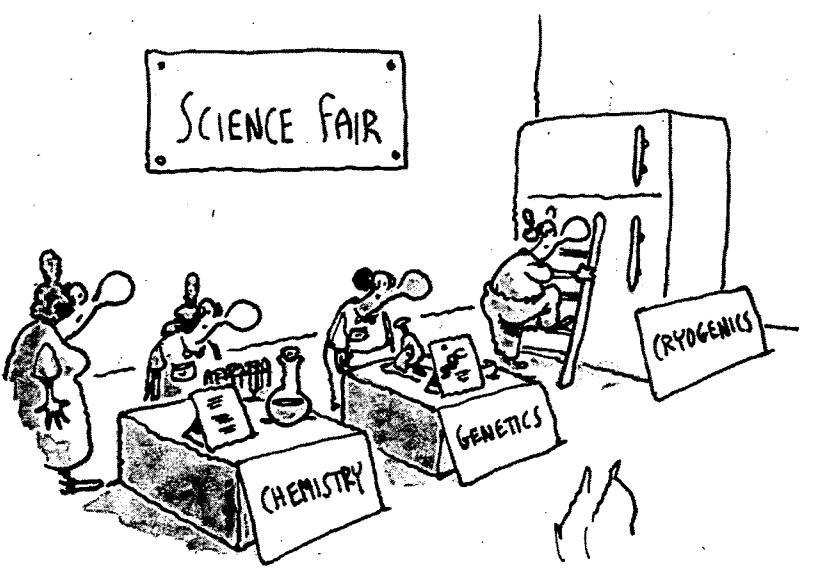
"Looks like your bus, dude. You come visit soon and I'll teach you to boogie board. It'll be awesome."

It was the best part about any animal, Dazzle thought. The part that got enthusiastic about things. (Even boogie boards.)

"I'll do that, Diggy," Dazzle said sincerely, as he climbed out of the car. "And if you ever make it to Big Sur? I'll teach you the only thing I know. And that, of course, would be taking really long and meaningful naps."

"Do what you do best, dude. Or don't do nothing at all."

And of course Diggy, as always, was right.



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Regarding Mr. Reed's new story, we've been told (by reliable but unnamed sources) that while the manuscript for it sat in your editor's pile of submissions, Mr. Reed received an unexpected phone call. The call was from a gentleman in Sherman Oaks, California, whose name you might find on our masthead. We were not privy to its contents, but Mr. Reed sent us an email in which he said he was now hiding in his basement with his shotgun in his lap.

We wish Mr. Reed well and we hope the events surrounding this story won't affect his amazing productivity. (It isn't hard to type with a shotgun in one's lap, is it?)

The Visionaries

By Robert Reed

EVERYONE IS AN UNMITIGATED failure.

And then success comes, or it doesn't.

When I was still an unpublished author, I wrote a long story about an average fellow wandering through his relentlessly unremarkable life. His world wasn't particularly different from mine, except for being set in some down-the-road future. The plot was minimal, the sf ideas scarce. Yet something about the narrative felt important to me. Typing like a madman, I produced a 25,000-word manuscript complete with rambling conversations and a contrived terminology. The next several drafts were agonizing attempts to reshape the work, creating something leaner and more salable. But I couldn't seem to apply even the most basic lessons of effective writing. In the end, I had a novella nobody would willingly read.

But on the premise that I didn't know squat, I licked a fortune in stamps and addressed the oversized manila envelope to the first magazine on my list of professional markets.

A few weeks later, both the manuscript and a standard rejection note were jammed into my tiny mailbox.

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The next magazine yielded the same discouraging result.

The third market was decent enough to include little index cards, one card begging for a plot, while another explained how the golden age of science fiction was twelve — the implication being that if I wasn't writing for my boyhood self, I was wasting everybody's precious eyes.

But this was the 1980s, which were something of a literary heaven. There was a surprising number of healthy professional magazines as well as various anthologies and semi-prozines, each of those markets endlessly dredging the muck for worthwhile stories. And I was a stubborn soul, which can be a blessing for any would-be author. The same tired manuscript could circulate for years, and whenever editors changed or new markets opened up, I found myself with fresh targets to bombard.

But in this case, rabid conviction wasn't necessary.

I won't mention where I sent my novella next, except to say that the market was tiny, and it died long ago.

The blunt truth is that I have taken, and am now breaking, a solemn pledge to confess nothing, including that little tidbit. But it's important to take this single risk — for reasons that will, I hope, grow clear in time.

Ten days after sending off the manuscript, it returned to my mailbox.

On this occasion, nobody bothered with a rejection slip, and my big paper clip was missing too.

Bastards.

I was still trying to decide which address to write on the next envelope when my phone rang. A voice that I didn't know asked if I was so-and-so, and when I admitted that I was, the voice introduced himself before inquiring if I would like to sell him my story.

I recognized the gentleman's name, as it happened.

If you enjoy good science fiction, then perhaps you've read his work. Though probably not, since our old voices tend to fade away rather quickly these days, through retirement or death, or simply because tastes change inside the tiny, fickle world of publishing.

As a writer, I had sold absolutely nothing.

And here was somebody who wanted to purchase my work. So I gulped once and blurted, "Yes, of course. Sure."

"Very good," he said.

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"I didn't realize," I managed. "You're an editor too?"

That earned a breathy silence. Then the wise old author told me, "No," before adding, "This is a rather unique situation."

I didn't have anything to say.

He referred to me as, "Sir," and then asked when we could meet. "These matters are best done in person," he said.

I teased myself with images of being carted off to some writerly location, like New York or San Francisco, or maybe Oxford, Mississippi.

But then he promised, "I can be standing at your front door in ten minutes' time."

"Where are you?"

"At the Holiday Inn."

I was as naïve as could be, but this seemed like an unlikely twist in the ongoing plot.

"May I come and make my offer to you, sir?"

"Sure," I said.

"Very good."

He hung up, and then I hung up, considering what little I knew about this semi-famous author — the novel and handful of stories that I had read, and what I thought I might have heard about the man.

Did I have time to buy beer?

I settled on running the vacuum and stacking my dirty dishes in the filthy kitchen sink, and then because much of the world appreciates pants, I pulled on a clean-enough pair of jeans.

Writing can be very easy or brutally tough, depending on the specific task in question. When I hide my many weaknesses and make a parade of my two or three genuine strengths, I think I do rather well for myself. The trouble is that even after years of practice, I'm still learning exactly what my strengths are.

The most important lesson I ever taught myself is that I'm not in the prediction business. To succeed, all I need to do is catch an interesting glimpse or two of somebody's future. Not my future, or even my world's. But *somebody's* tomorrow has to be imagined and then grafted into my present, which is always interesting to me, and of course the present has its roots buried deep in the fecund, well-watered past. Which is why

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science fiction, at least in my head, serves as a perspective where all times blend together in a palatable, too-often predictable stew.

IMAGINE my honored guest as being male and white. Though even if that happens to be true, I'm not admitting much, since sf writers frequently have testicles and a European heritage. I'll also warn you that he, or perhaps she, has subsequently died. Although that could be another direction — an easy lie meant to keep you safely removed from the truth.

For the purpose of this telling, he was a middle-aged fellow with bright eyes and a trim white beard as well as a considerable weight problem. And I lived in a small apartment at the top of a steep flight of stairs, which meant that to make good on his promise, he had to fight a lot of gravity to reach my front door.

Hearing his gasps, I stepped out on the landing and quietly watched the ongoing drama.

He survived the climb, barely, and once the poor gentleman could breathe again, he shot me with an all-business stare, introducing himself.

I shook a sweaty hand and invited him inside.

This was a weekday evening, as I recall. Sunlight was pouring through the big west window. I had always assumed that writers were endlessly curious souls, but my guest acted distinctly uninterested in the details of my life. He ignored my posters, records, and dirty dishes. He gave my bookshelves a quick glance, probably just to hunt for his own name. Then he collapsed into an old green chair that my mother had donated to me instead of the Salvation Army. I occupied a lumpy sofa with a similar pedigree. He was dressed for comfort, but I can't remember what he was wearing. I do have a vivid memory of his briefcase, however. It was small and leather and rather expensive looking, sitting in his expansive lap. Beside me was the battered copy of my story, fresh from the day's mail. I don't remember any pleasantries. If we made small talk, those ordinary words have been lost to the ages. But he did name my story by its title and then mentioned that he had read it through more than once, and he was prepared to offer me a fair sum to own every last word.

"Own every last word," was his phrase. I have never forgotten that.

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In a rare show of business acumen, I put on a skeptical face, asking what was fair.

"Twenty cents," he told me.

At that moment, I would have sold the manuscript for any stack of pennies — just so long as I was admitted into the ranks of the professional.

But then he added, "Per word," and watched as my expression changed, taking a certain joy out of what my eyes and gawking mouth showed him.

I gasped, not quite believing what I had heard.

Then my benefactor reached into his briefcase [illegible]ing out a fat manila envelope. With a flourish, he withdrew a stack of one hundred dollar bills, and he counted out fifty of those green treasures, spreading them across the freshly vacuumed, decidedly ugly shag carpet.

There isn't a novice writer who hasn't dreamed of his first sale, the scene often accompanied by the clashing of cymbals from an orchestra playing giddily somewhere offstage.

But I doubt any of us envision this kind of moment.

Dumbfounded, I stared at that staggering fortune. For me? For a story that couldn't find any other home?

"I don't remember," I whispered. "What magazine wants this?"

The man hadn't noticed my apartment, but he had a stern, absorbing way of staring into my eyes.

"Or is it for some theme anthology, maybe?"

"No," he said, his voice just short of loud, the single word delivered with a rigid backbone.

"And how did you find it? Do they let you read the slush piles?" I asked, naming the last market to reject me.

He took a long wet breath. Sternly, he said, "My methods have to remain confidential. And I have to warn you: We have no intention of actually publishing your work."

"No?"

He sat back in the old chair. When he stopped staring at me, his eyes lifted. "If you accept our money," he explained to the ceiling, "then you're making a solemn and binding commitment. From this day forward, whenever you write about — "

He named my protagonist; "Merv," I'll call him.

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"Send your work directly to us," he told me. "And only us."

"Who is 'us'?" I inquired.

From the briefcase came a tiny white business card, nothing on it but a P.O. box address and a phone number — the former set at one end of the country, the latter wearing an area code from the opposite coast. "I promise. We'll pay handsomely for everything of value. But you shouldn't expect traditional contracts or other paper trails. This is a handshake arrangement. And with the handshake comes my word that as our relationship matures, we will offer you substantial increases in pay."

"If I write about Merv again."

"You will," he assured. "Probably not often, but it will happen. At random intervals, and for the rest of your life."

"Okay," I managed. "But what's this all mean?"

He dropped his gaze, and with a sly smile, he told me that he knew quite a bit more than he would ever admit.

"And who's 'us'?" I asked again.

My benefactor set the business card on top of the hundreds and then sat back in that awful old chair.

"I don't understand," I confessed.

With a shrug, he said, "But you're a bright youngster. From what I see, you're even a little bit clever. Keep filling the pages with words, and there might actually be a modest little career waiting for you."

That was heartening news, I thought.

"But you're never going to publish my story? Ever?"

The old writer's patience frayed a little. "Here's one very good lesson, son. One freelance writer to another: If somebody offers to buy your very worst work, and they pay you real money, and on top of that, they swear that the world will never see what you have done...well, you should take their charity, my boy, and smile while you do it.

"Am I understood?"

My benefactor had a talent for predictions.

As promised, I gradually built up a small, tidy career as a writer. Within six months, I'd made my first professional sales — a little story to a failing anthology, another to a minor magazine. One of those efforts was noticed in larger circles, and through it, I managed to sell my first novel

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— a rambling, exuberant, and exceptionally youthful stack of pages for which I was paid a fraction of what my unreadable novella had earned. But long before my novel's pub date, my various monies ran out and my talents with short fiction were proving uneven at best.

Ask any writer: Careers often begin with long droughts.

After I sold a third story, I went blank. I went cold. I forgot how to write, or I was too self-conscious after my little successes to work effectively. Whatever the culprit, the only way to pay my rent was to bring "Merv" out of his strange little box, inviting him to take over my brain for as long as he wished.

But even Merv proved to be a difficult muse.

When I wanted him, the man wasn't there. I would sit and sit and sit, my butt going numb in an office chair that I'd bought second-hand from Goodwill. In those years, I wrote on a manual office Royal typewriter — a chunk of steel as reliable as the sunset — and my paper was the cheapest stock I could find, and my little desk was another worn-out gift from home. I would type Merv's real name again and again, but that did nothing. Retyping the original story seemed to help, but I eventually decided that was just a byproduct of wishful thinking. Weeks and months would pass, and then during some moment devoid of significance, I would see or hear something that wasn't entirely real. Usually a disembodied voice would call me Merv, or sometimes a random face would swim into the corner of an eye, or maybe I'd feel somebody's fingers slipping inside a phantom pocket, hunting for a set of cold car keys. And if I happened to be close to my Royal, I'd begin transcribing whatever decided to reveal itself to me.

Most of the time I managed only a few disjointed pages.

The "Merv" stories felt about as urgent and genuine as what I did when I wrote well — immersed in the images, lost to time. But unlike my sf work, there never was that delicious sense of the profound, much less any trace of an authentic plot line. And afterward, rereading the raw manuscript, the whole mess always felt contrived, cluttered, and pointless.

Like the dream you enjoyed at dawn, the experience enthralled until the moment you opened your eyes.

Around the fourth time he slipped inside my skull, I began wondering if Merv was real.

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That story began and ended with my protagonist sitting before an enormous television, and I did nothing but describe what he was seeing and hearing on an ever-shifting, seemingly endless array of channels.

Seven pages was the sum total of that effort. But somebody must have liked what I did, because as payment, I received a sealed plastic package containing three thousand dollars in cash.

What if I was seeing the future?

Yet this was a rather anemic gift, as mind-bending wonders go. I had no control over when the magic would strike, much less any influence in Merv's motions, words, or thoughts. Imagine a video camera wielded by a stranger, and worse still, a stranger who had never used a camera before. The views kept leaping from this to that and back again, no rhyming reason to the mess and not a single landmark looking even a little familiar. In those seven pages, the longest pause came when Merv picked up a cold beer, barley and hops swirling against my tongue as well as his. Then I felt his belch and heard somebody say, "Excuse you."

I didn't recognize her voice or know her name. But Merv turned to look at a girl pretty enough to earn a long stare from me. I'm going to call her "Mary." But Merv didn't stare. He barely gave his companion a glance. I heard him grunt, "Sorry," before flipping over to a screaming commercial for some kind of computer game. Over the roars of exploding tanks, he added, "Excuse me for living, darling."

On his finest day, Merv was an unrepentant male animal.

Yet some cosmic purpose — maybe just to serve as the punchline for a god's joke — had connected the two of us in this fundamental way.

Perhaps other people had this odd gift, I reasoned. Perhaps millions of us did. But few of us enjoyed that very peculiar habit of sitting alone in front of a typewriter, looking at bare white paper, begging images and compelling words to find their way into an otherwise empty brain.

Just once, I used a piece of Merv's world inside one of my regular stories.

The first magazine rejected the work for unrelated reasons.

But two days before that manuscript returned home, a familiar voice called me. With considerable disappointment, the old writer informed me that I had broken one cardinal law: I'd employed a brand name that

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belonged to him. To them. "And before you send that story out again," he growled, "I want the name removed from the text."

I felt rather brave that night.

Or maybe I was in an abnormally bad mood.

Either way, I refused to see how one word mattered. I reminded him that there wasn't any contract between us, and I claimed that "Merv" was just another character and I could do what I wanted with the bastard and the world that I was drawing around him.

My benefactor let me ramble for a while. Once my energy was spent, he firmly reminded me, "Through us, you have earned thousands and thousands of dollars. And now perhaps you can tell me, how much of that good cash have you declared on your taxes?"

None.

"I don't want to bring in the IRS," he said. "And you don't want me to make that phone call either. Do you?"

It is amazing the things that make a young man crumble.

I whispered, "Please don't."

"Pardon me?"

"Don't call them."

There was a long pause. Then he mentioned, "Oh, and by the way. You made two small mistakes with your story. And I think you missed a killer ending too. But I can help you fix those problems. I even know the editor who definitely needs to see your manuscript next."

And that's when I found a new and compelling reason to cherish our rich, very odd relationship.

MY FIRST NOVEL garnered fair to good reviews, plus a few calls for readers to watch my newborn career. My second novel had the typical sophomore problems, but the third novel found a modest audience. Then after several miscues, I stumbled into a far-future series full of distant worlds and brave humans — my own private playground for the imagination.

Combined, my writing money and "Merv money" proved good enough to lift me into the middle-class.

I joined my professional organization, and whenever attending the big

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conventions, I'd seek out the hotel suite that served as a party hub for writers and editors and their suffering spouses. At one Worldcon, I noticed an older woman wearing a rather flattering dress, and more importantly, I noticed that she was staring at me. The ribbon on her badge identified her as a writer. What with the difference in our ages, her interest was pleasant but not too inviting. I returned a couple of her stares with polite, empty smiles. I drifted close enough to catch her name and a peek at her ample cleavage. And being human, I made up a story with me as the protagonist, and she was the horny old lady who had a thing for my work and maybe my body too.

I was completely, foolishly wrong.

Eating dinner with colleagues, I brought up the woman's name. Did anybody know her?

One of them did. I learned that my lady admirer was a writer by the narrowest margins — a single sale to a marginally professional market, and that more than twenty years ago. And why, by the way, was I asking about her?

"She's got her sights on me," I boasted.

"Oh, I seriously doubt that," my colleague laughed. "Since she's gay and always has been."

I must have looked disappointed.

Then with the typical writerly tact, somebody else piped in, "You're going to have to find another grandma for your May-September thing."

But I was right; the woman was keeping tabs on me.

I sat on a panel the next morning: The Effective Habits of the Working Writer. I find that success in that public environment means saying as little as possible, yet leaving the audience believing you might not be a total idiot. I thought I managed that trick quite nicely. Two minutes before we finished, the mystery woman slipped into the conference room. She sat in back, dressed for a fancy cocktail party, smiling intently at no one but me. After the panel concluded and I autographed a few books for fans, my admirer approached, waiting her turn before handing me a business card with a phone number and P.O. box that I knew by heart.

On the back of the card was a hand-scrawled note asking me to meet her in an hour, in the hotel's darkest bar.

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That's where we finally made our introductions.

I was nervous in ways I normally don't feel: Heart-thudding anxiety and a drought on the tongue, my panicked brain fighting to sound brave, asking, "Why do you keep watching me?"

Her smile was the brightest thing in the room.

"I just wanted to meet the next so-and-so," she admitted, naming my benefactor. And her benefactor too, it seemed.

Three words best describe humanity's attitude toward the universe:

I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

That's what I confessed to her. I pleaded complete ignorance, and she responded with amusement and some disappointment. "I thought he would have explained this to you," she mentioned. "Or you would have pieced it together for yourself, at least."

I didn't tell her my guesses. Suddenly I had no faith in any of them.

"Want to hear a story?" she asked.

"Always."

"There used to be so many pulp magazines," she began, the face and voice turning wistful. "One of the pulps had a certain young editor — I doubt you'd recognize his name — but he was very lucky, and he was exceptionally gifted, particularly when it came to talents that editors don't need. For instance, the youngster had a spectacular memory for useless detail. And he had a paranoid's ability to string together unlikely events. And where wiser editors would have stopped after page two of a bad manuscript, he would push through to the end, absorbing every cliché and lame plot twist into his cavernous brain.

"He was the genius who noticed certain key repetitions in the slush-pile submissions. Settings and time periods — near-future, you'd call this — and most important, he found a string of shared colloquialisms. Not the usual sf terms, mind you. Nothing about hyperdrives or phasers. But in two unreadable manuscripts submitted by two separate authors, there were clear references to a terminal disease called AIDS."

She paused, weighing my response.

"When was this?" I asked.

"Maybe in the forties, maybe earlier." She shrugged. "I probably shouldn't tell you that much. But somebody is going to approach you. Somebody you haven't met yet. This will be official business, and I want

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you ready. And for purely selfish reasons, I hope this heads-up helps me earn your trust."

I had no idea what she was talking about. But flattery is flattery, and it was working on me.

She continued: "Eventually that long-ago editor identified eight novice authors, none of whom could write their way out of obscurity. But each had a powerful interest in a single shared future. Each had a favorite protagonist. Like you have your 'Merv.' They might try to shoehorn their boy or girl into a space opera or a zombie fight. But even those inept attempts at creativity couldn't obscure the common threads.

"After compiling his list, the editor traveled the country, meeting with each would-be writer. He discovered that all of his subjects had a consuming interest in the future. Their fascination began in early childhood, and the best two or three of them talked about closing their eyes and seeing some unborn world through someone else's gaze. Which is how I feel when I get into that state."

"Who's your Merv?" I asked.

"Her name's Yvonne, and she won't be born for another fifty-three years. Since our lives and theirs run at the same pace, that puts her more than a century in the future. Which is about as far ahead as any of us can see." She closed her eyes, a fond smile emerging. "In every example, the visionary is linked to somebody of the same gender and age, a similar culture and essential beliefs. Merv is very much like you, I'd say — a white heterosexual Midwestern American male. While Yvonne is a Californian Free-Stater in her late fifties. She's white and a little heavy, and she's a very happy lesbian, and in a hundred other ways, she could be me.

"And in a thousand ways, she isn't me at all."

I had never asked this question aloud. But this was the perfect moment to say, "How the hell does this happen?"

"You mean, what's the scientific underpinning?"

"Yeah."

"You're the young talent. How do two bodies separated by decades make contact each other?"

I shrugged. "Somebody must have a guess."

"Guesses are cheap." My new friend finished her coffee, and then she told me, "I'm not a very good writer, you know."

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I didn't respond.

"You're far more capable than me," she continued. "I can see that, and I don't even like science fiction anymore."

"But you once sent off stories."

"In my school-girl years." She shook her head, a young woman lurking in her laugh. "I was captivated by the twenty-first century. Enough so that my family wondered if I was mildly crazy."

"That's how they found you?"

"Of course. That old-time editor had built an organization around those first visionaries. He founded a mostly invisible society that still combs the slush piles, searching for key phrases or telltale words. And most important, his people are always hunting for souls like us."

"Microsoft," I said.

"What about it?"

"Through Merv, I saw an advertisement about them. It was a real corporation by then, but I didn't know it."

"We're investment tools. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Aren't we?"

"We can be." But then she warned, "There is a lesson that we like to share. Imagine that it's 1900, and you find a photograph from the future, and it shows the typical city today. Nearly a hundred years in the future. The streets are full of cars, the skies jammed with airplanes...and what can you do with this rich glimpse of things not yet born?"

"You tell me," I said.

"When cars were first manufactured," she said, "there were dozens if not hundreds of competing companies. It was the same for planes, and how could anyone look up at those tiny jets and guess that Boeing would eventually build most of the world's airliners?"

"That's why brand names are so important," I offered.

"But they're not always an answer. For instance, after decades of expansion and technological mastery, the major airlines are currently flying passengers and cargo to every part of the globe. Yet if you tally up all the bankruptcies and debts along with the profits, you end up with an industry that has never made a genuine dollar. Which leaves the airlines, as spectacular as they look, as rather bad investments, all in all."

I hadn't thought of that.

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"And there's a bigger problem," she continued. "Suppose you know about Microsoft's rich future. You go in early and buy up a ton of shares. But time is incredibly sensitive to small touches. You have to remain invisible. Your touch can't be felt. But at some point you are going to influence the company's evolution. Your capital will make the stock price too high, and management gets a little too confident, and the next thing you know, this baby monopoly of yours is lurching down the wrong path.

"Which forces the question: How much can you do before you begin to strangle your golden goose?"

I nodded, grinned. "So I'm a visionary, am I?"

"The same as our benefactor is," she said. "And the same as me. Except of course that I'm much, much better at this business."

Now I took offense.

"But why shouldn't I boast?" she asked. "Sure, you understand plot lines and characterizations. But Yvonne and I are as tightly joined as any two ladies can be, with or without the years stuck between us."

"So you're the expert here," I conceded. "All right. Do you have a guess how this process works?"

"The vision trick? Oh, sure."

I leaned forward.

"Quantum mechanics," she blurted. Then she laughed, at me or at herself. "I know, I know. That's just sf-speak for magic. But that's what this is. Magic. When I bother with the question, what I usually assume is that people have always had a tiny but useful capacity to see into the future. It wouldn't take much talent to give us an advantage, and a tiny blessing would eventually make an impression on our genetics. What we need are connections to unborn minds that happened to be wired like ours. Since minds are filled with flowing electrons, and since electrons are ghostly things on the brink of reality....

"Well, write the logic however you want. But that's the story I prefer. I think of the future, and Yvonne's head is waiting for me. And likewise, it probably helps that my receptor seems just as fascinated in the past as I am in the future."

I sat quietly, thinking to myself.

"By any chance is your Merv a backward-looking individual?"

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"He's a traditionalist," I allowed.

A beer-swilling Neanderthal, I might have said.

I asked, "What about our benefactor?"

"Hector is his döppelganger," she offered. "A middle-management gentleman inside the future insurance industry."

"I didn't mean that," I said. "What else does he do?"

"How does our angel serve this secretive and very peculiar operation?" She winked. "He has earned a fortune by helping young visionaries become professional writers. It's one of the best ways to keep us happy. Or did you guess that trick already? The wise, worldly author coaches us, allowing us to make those one or two early sales. And because of her tiny career, an aging dyke can attend these conventions as a professional, even though she long ago gave up all pretense of a career in fiction."

"How many of us are there?"

"There's just a handful of full-time writers," she said. "And that includes you and our benefactor. Which is why, according to my usually reliable sources, the higher-ups are looking at you to take the helm when the old gentleman finally retires. They want a younger writer to serve as their face and voice, and when necessary, to act as their bullwhip."

I tried not to feel flattered, but I was. Then I tried to embrace this possibility of success, and revulsion swept over me.

"All right," I said. "What about people like you?"

"The occasional writers?" She tossed her head to one side. "Well, there's quite a few more of us. I don't know hard numbers, but from what I've been told, six or maybe seven percent of the associate SFWA members are visionaries."

This was a lot to swallow, but I was doing my best.

"What happened to the original editor? Is he still alive?"

"I've heard he is, and I've heard that he isn't. Either way, he has no active role in today's operation."

"And who is in charge?"

"Nobody either of us will get to meet." She looked around the gloomy bar, as if that would prevent the world from eavesdropping on us. Then she leaned close, her breasts spilling across the tabletop. "But what do names matter, just as long as the money's good?"

* * *

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Studies show that the human eye sees almost nothing.

Walk into a strange room and your gaze flits back and forth, up and down, noticing a chaotic series of details that the brain rapidly and imprecisely organizes into an image that only seems to resemble a snapshot. Novelty, if recognized, might beg for a prolonged stare. The same is true for perceived threats and objects of love. But what the eye ignores is everything familiar, everything safe, and if you're limited to the perceptions of an ordinary man sitting in the future — thirty-two years from the present moment, in my case — then you have to work hard to ignore the tire commercials and the next sip of beer, concentrating on the tiny glimpses of what genuinely matters.

For some years now, Mary has lived with my Merv.

She is a voice off-stage and the sleepy face across the breakfast table, a consummate folder of laundry and the loyal delivery system of Budweiser. And while I have never seen a wedding ring riding her finger, I have the strong sense that she considers the two of them to be married, at least in some informal way.

She calls him, "Darling."

When he looks in her general direction, she smiles.

Merv and I are entirely different species. Maybe every other visionary latches onto a brain that mirrors his own, but not me. At least that's what I tell myself. But Merv and I do share one glorious commonality: Each in his own fashion, we are in love with Mary.

Three times, I have seen the young woman naked.

On two occasions she was dressing in a rush — for work, I presume — and my glimpses were little more than teases. But the golden incident was early in their relationship. Merv strode into the bedroom to find his lover stretched out on their sheets, on her belly, bare elbows holding up her fine shoulders and one moistened finger turning the page of a book that couldn't have mattered less to the two men ogling her.

She was pretty and trim, younger than her boyfriend by at least ten years, and blessed with the kind of delicate face that would remain girlish until old age set in. She had an easy smile and an infectious way of flipping her dark brown hair. And she thought enough of her man to have had his name tattooed in a private place, and I imagine that's why Merv was just then staring at her bare rump. He was reading his name, which wasn't

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Merv. Then with a single finger, he traced the artful letters, dimpling the smooth firm flesh beneath.

That sweet vision came early in their relationship.

By the time I shared coffee with my female colleague, Merv's common-law marriage had evolved past romance and then past comfortable, entering a realm of practiced indifference.

I often saw Mary's coat on a hook and her wet toothbrush on the glass shelf above the bathroom sink. And her voice came into Merv's ears on occasion, but he didn't act particularly eager to look in her direction.

Once when he was alone, he paused in the hallway, and for a few moments we studied some kind of holographic image, our girl standing at the entranceway to a public arboretum, flanked by twin beds of climbing blue roses.

My counterpart was thinking back to better days, I assumed.

But I have to warn you there is no way to reach inside the future skull. Merv picked up the picture, and because I'm a writer, I wrote a story. Merv was wishing they could start over again, or he was planning to do something special tonight, or maybe he was considering marrying the girl finally and starting a real family. With so few glimpses of their shared lives, it was possible to draw a multitude of unlikely, purely fictitious schemes

And because I'm a visionary, I dutifully recorded the company logo embossed on the holograph's silver frame.

A year after my illuminating coffee, I woke from a brief nap, sat up in bed, and found Merv staring hard at a bruised bare arm. Mary's arm, I realized. It was one of those very brief, exceptionally useless visions that I never bothered to write down. It began with the bruise and ended with him touching the arm and squeezing, and I could feel the bone under the darkened skin, and I heard him asking how it felt and she turned and smiled, but with her eyes never quite looking at him. She was staring at a point several inches to one side of him, smiling with a little more urgency than usual, and using a voice that shook me back to the present, she said, "It's fine."

With a begging tone, she said, "I'm fine. Let me go, please."

I hadn't seen my benefactor in years.

One morning, he called me at my house and said that he had flown

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into town last night, that he was on his way from one unspecified place to another, but of course I'd want to meet with him. "In two hours," he instructed. "At the Holiday Inn bar."

At this point, I should remind you that the man at the beginning of my story was sharp and wise and by my youthful perspective, rather old. But of course he was only in his fifties then. Not quite twenty years had passed, and seventy is the new sixty, as they say. Yet the man that I saw was older and far more worn than I expected. And for the sake of honesty, I should mention that it wasn't quite ten in the morning, and he was drinking at least his second rum.

The writer in me looked for direction — some set of clues to tell me if this was going to be an ominous meeting, or merely uncomfortable.

"It's been too long," said a remarkably steady voice.

I looked at the empty glass next to his fresh glass, making agreeable sounds.

"You're doing some very good work," he mentioned.

"Which kind of work?" I asked.

The implications earned a grin. Then he sipped his rum, making a point of not answering my question.

Quietly, he said, "She told me. About talking to you."

"Who did?"

"Yvonne's friend."

That's how he referred to the lady. And by the same token, I'm probably known at the home office as "Merv's friend."

"She shouldn't have done that," he said.

I said nothing.

"That was a large breach of the rules," he continued.

I said, "Sorry."

"Screw the rules," he said, the voice meant to sound drunk. But nothing about him was sloppy or off-keel. Like many fine old writers, my benefactor could hold his booze.

"What's going on here?" I finally asked.

"Nothing."

"Okay. So why are you here?"

"I thought I owed it to you."

I waited.

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"An explanation," he said.

"For what?"

"She made a promise, and it won't be kept. I'm sorry."

I guessed where he was heading but still had to ask, "What promise?"

The poor fellow finished his drink and waved for another. Then after a deep sigh, he leaned close and said nothing.

"Are you retiring?" I prompted.

"I have retired." He ached when he said those words. "Just short of four weeks ago, I was informed of my immediate change in status."

I nodded.

"You're not replacing me, son. That's why I'm paying you this visit. You deserve to hear the news from a familiar face, and that has to be me."

I never understood the job, certainly not well enough to know if I would ever want it, much less if I would be any good at it. But rejections always cut hard.

"You were my first candidate," he continued. "My chosen successor and heir to the shepherd's calling. And I think you would have done a perfectly fine job of it too. Not quite up to my standards, maybe...."

He let his voice trail off, giving me a just-joking grin.

But he was being honest.

To the best of my ability, I absorbed the news. Then after his fresh drink arrived, I asked, "Who's going to be the next benefactor?"

His face reddened.

My guts tightened.

"There won't be anyone."

"But what about — ?"

"They don't want us anymore," he informed me, his own wounds deeper and bloodier than mine would ever be.

"They don't?"

"It's the Internet, son. Everybody's online, and computers are so damned easy. For the last decade, we've been developing software that does nothing but reach out across the world, on public sites and past most of the existing firewalls. I don't understand Boolean logic, but these are powerful tools, and they've been designed to hunt for key phrases and the odd notions attached to those phrases. Things that mean nothing to most observers, but of course not to us."

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I hadn't expected this turn. So much for precognition.

"Writers have always been scarce," he reminded me. "But if you can reach out and snatch up a thousand useful bits of information, and you can take the gems not just from here but from China and India and Russia, and every other place under the sun...."

He suddenly seemed quite drunk.

I was empty and a little cold.

"But how do you pay all those people?" I asked.

As dumb as any string of words that I have ever said.

"They don't have to pay anybody," he snapped. "They take what they need. Didn't you know? Everything on the Internet is free, dammit!"

"And us?" I managed.

For some reason, that earned a little smile and a long, impenetrable stare. Was he feeling pity for me? For himself? Or maybe was he recalling a final battle that he'd won on our behalf? Whatever the reason, he whispered to me, "As long as we're alive, they have to pay us. If only to help keep us quiet."

My next novel was due last month, and I was typing as if my hair was on fire. But in the midst of a deep-space fight, just as my charismatic hero was about to dispatch the brutal villain, Merv intruded.

Visions come for no good reason.

As far as I can tell, the process is relentlessly random. Neither Merv's emotions nor mine have ever played any role in deciding when the two of us are linked. Which is why the humdrum moments are the norm: The most spectacular life is still built upon a lot of sitting and waiting, idle chatter and toilet time.

I was writing my book, and then I wasn't.

Before me was a set of descending stairs, wooden and steep. The air was dark and smelled of mold. Little cues told me that Merv was navigating his way down into the unfinished basement of his narrow townhouse. When he stopped at the midway point, I heard a sniff. A sob. Then a longer, wetter sniff that ended with a small voice coughing quietly.

Merv's eyes peered into the quarter-lit gloom.

I saw nothing.

He took another two steps, and the familiar face emerged — narrow

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and still pretty despite the rich stream of blood emerging from both nostrils.

She was lying on the concrete slab of the floor, on her back, one arm lifting up while the other lay beside her at a peculiar angle, and her mouth full of blood, making her cough once again, weakly, before the soft scared voice quietly said, "No."

Mary said, "I'm sorry."

She said, "Please," and the working arm lifted higher, desperately trying to fend off whatever blow fell next.

LAST YEAR, I was attending the Worldcon in California, and as usual, I spent long stretches of time in the writer's suite. Polite conversation and one-upsmanship are the normal state of affairs there. I found myself standing with four colleagues, sharing war stories that helped underscore the miserable state of publishing today. And in the midst of that measured pain, a kid joined us. He happened to be a name, one of those bright souls who did more than simply write stories. He had an honest career in science, and he blogged, and I wouldn't be surprised if he had a trust fund somewhere too. Nothing about him seemed hungry. But he had been blessed with a sharp wit and an IQ that had to be more impressive than mine, and he probably couldn't imagine ever being old, and he carried with him a sense of being perpetually bored with the ordinary world.

For maybe ten minutes, he shared our air, and with just a crisp dozen sentences, he managed to mention that his first novel was being made into a movie and his last one was going to be a computer game, and he had met Spielberg, and he was up for a couple fat awards, and then before he abandoned our disagreeable company, he looked straight at me, asking, "Don't we have a wonderful life, doing all this fun work and getting paid for it, too?"

Every other writer was pissed. One sour gal said, "See how long he stays the flavor of the month. In thirty years, see where he stands."

He will be standing in the SFWA suite, drinking the free booze. That's the future I predict for all of us.

The next morning, that same young writer and I happened to appear on the same panel.

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The subject is not important. (Really, the topic for any panel is just a suggestion anyway.) But two incidents stand out: First, my cocky colleague made a point of sitting beside me before we began, shaking my hand and referring to me by my first name, fondly, as if we were very close friends.

Something about his attitude teased my intuitions.

On the spur of the moment, I mentioned my benefactor's name. I knew the old gentleman was still in business when the kid got his start. Did their paths happen to cross?

The reply was a conspiratorial wink, plus meaningful silence.

The second incident came in the middle of the panel. Without warning, my new best friend offered his theory about writing.

It wasn't the topic on hand, but this was a new power in our industry. Everybody listened intently as he explained, "Stories are lies. At their very best, they achieve quite a lot. Quite a lot indeed. But they can never describe more than a sliver of what's real, even in the simplest life. And I think it's fair to admit that more than most people, writers will believe whichever lie happens to make them happiest and most secure."

And at that point, the young titan glanced at the grizzled veteran sitting beside him, and again, he offered a telltale wink.

HERE IS A NEW, rather different version of the story: What if there is an organization founded in the past and dedicated to the immediate future? Maybe a wise editor working a slush pile is the founder. Maybe some other individual or group is responsible, and everything that I think I know is just a useful cover story. Origins don't matter here as much as the goal. What if the point of this shadowy, secretive group is not simply to make a profit? What if there is a second, far more impressive agenda at work in our world?

Science fiction likes to think of time travel in the same way clerks think of objects resting on shelves. Everything needs to be in its place. Touch nothing too much, and history will unfold with a predictable series of events, noble and important and well worth preserving.

But I don't think much of that model of time and space.

Touch anything, even in the tiniest fashion, and everything will

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change. Chaos and the most minuscule motions of the atoms will bring consequences to anyone with the capacity to dabble in things that haven't come true yet. Yes, you might make a fat living off the stock market in another ten years. But isn't there a larger, grander goal waiting for those people who can push the objects on the high selves, influencing just enough to remake things that haven't yet been?

What I think is happening is this:

Someone — black-robed monks, maybe, or white-clad government scientists — have been collecting clues about the future, and with those clues they are trying to build the tools by which they can shape what isn't real yet.

I don't think things have progressed very far, no.

Whoever is in charge, I have to believe that he or they are taking a long, exceptionally patient view of this process.

And I suspect that the project will prove impossible. But really, if you had the future in your reach, how could you not wish to fiddle with those very tempting dials?

I shouldn't tell you any of this, of course.

But I have made it this far already, and nobody seems to have noticed or cared. And that is no small success on my part.

For doing what I am about to do, I am sorry.

You are still too young to care about what I'm telling you. You're a child reading a story written by someone who may be dead and forgotten by now. I can't even be sure that you're the "Mary" that I have seen just a few dozen times in my life...or that you will ever grow into that lovely young woman....

But I am going to tell you Merv's real name, as a warning.

In my own little bid to change the future for the better.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THINGS THAT GO CLANK IN THE NIGHT

NOT SINCE the last Marvel comic book movie has there been a film such as *Iron Man*. Not since, what, the summer of 2007? Not since the resoundingly awful *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, or was it that bloated piñata stuffed with plot devices, *Spider-Man 3*? No matter. Despite a budget big enough to choke Galactus (a reported $225 million), *Iron Man* is just another-one-of-those, a picture described as "electrifying" and "a thunderrific thrill fest," that will be remembered by the ADD generation for weeks, perhaps even for months, until *Hulk 2* checks into the Cineplex and brings down the house with an earth-shattering roar above which we may hear a snatch from the movie that the dread Directoricus is making of our world, the cosmic cackling of Stan Lee (played by Hal Holbrook), latest in a long line of Marvel-type villains, once virtuous corporate heads and scientists gone over to the dark side due to financial pressures or some inner turmoil; and perhaps we'll even catch a glimpse of Stan, his withered body encased in science fictional armor of suitably demonic aspect, a high-tech Satan clanking along the avenues of Middle America with a coterie of Hugo Boss-wearing imps, rendering folks so brain-dead from blasts of his Mento-Rays that come the Apocalypse we'll all die happily, waiting for Superman to save us in the sequel.

Iron Man's first hour or so is made diverting by the presence of Robert Downey, Jr. playing off his image as America's Favorite Substance Abuser. (When he gets blown up, he wears an expression similar to that he displayed in criminal

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court after being sentenced to the slammer—it might have been cool, an in-joke of the sort inclined to pass for wit in such films, if Iron Man's armor had been modeled after those orange prison jumpsuits.) But thereafter the movie lapses into a by-the-numbers Biff Bam Boom affair with stale special effects.

You know, I'm tired of throwing darts at these balloons, so I'm going to bring in Darryl Schoonover to dialog about the movie. Darryl's a twenty-something über-nerd who hangs out down at the local comics store when he isn't zapping whiteheads in his bathroom mirror. He lives with his mom, thinks of himself as a comics intellectual, and hasn't had a date in two, three years, unless you consider it a date to have a high school bimbo hustle you into paying her way into *Spiderman 2* and a half-hour later you've managed to sneak your arm over the back of her seat and let your hand dangle so it just grazes her breast, whereupon she brushes your hand away, but stays put because she wants to see how that dreamy Tobey Maguire makes out against Doc Ock.

But first, the plot.

Tony Stark is every adolescent male's wet dream: a billionaire genius gearhead who makes cool weapons, drives cars with names that end in I, and gets babe after ungettable babe, so many of them he can't remember them a week later. Then one day after blowing up half a mountain range while demonstrating a powerful new missile in Afghanistan, he sees U.S. soldiers shot to pieces by Stark Industries weapons and is captured by forces led by the menacing Raza (Faran Tahir, soon to be seen in Star Trek), who directs Stark to build missiles for him in the terrorists' underground hideout. Stark pretends to comply, but with the aid of a fellow captive he builds instead a prototype of the Iron Man armor and crashes out, returning to the States where he's reunited with his Lamborghinis, his aide, Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), and his partner in crime, Obadiah Stane (a bald, bearded, and slightly porcine Jeff Bridges). This sequence, culminating with Stark donning a sexier version of the Iron Man armor and returning to Afghanistan to wreak vengeance on Raza and put on display his newly developed conscience regarding the scummy nature of his business, is admittedly entertaining—you're carried along by a mix of snappy one-liners and action, and given no time to think. But once Stark becomes a force for good and

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the real villain of the piece is "revealed," the momentum of the picture begins to dissipate.

Darryl? Your thoughts?

Okay, Loosh. I see what you're saying. Sure, the second hour is kinda lame compared to the first. The director isn't Tim Burton or Chris Nolan. It's Jon Bleeping Favreau, the guy who gave us *Elf*. 'Nuff said. But this is an origin story, and origin stories are freaking hard to film, so you have to give Favreau some credit.

No, I don't. For two hundred and twenty-five million he should have done better.

Seventy-five mil of that was the ad budget.

Excuse me. For a hundred fifty million he should have done better. They could have made a hundred and fifty good little movies...or fifty good little movies and one bloated idiot's delight.

Hey, this is a comic book movie, dude! It's no *Batman Begins*, but it's no *Daredevil* either. Tony Stark isn't as complicated a character as the Dark Knight, and Favreau did....

You're kidding, right? They're the same character. Rich assclown grows a conscience and turns to crime-fighting. One has a sado-mascochistic streak and a kink for black leather. The other has a satyr complex.

Favreau did the best he could to lay in some subtext. For instance, did you notice that all Iron Man's fights in Afghanistan take place in broad daylight and all his fights in the U.S.A. take place at night? Huh?

Wow! That *is* deep. So you're telling me Favreau was being subversive? Equating the oppressed people of Afghanistan with the Good, the Light, and the U.S., at least the current administration, with the Dark?

Duh!

If true, I scarcely think one symbolic allusion qualifies as subtext.

You know what, who cares what you think? All comic book fans care about is that stuff looks right...and it did. Iron Man's armor rocked!

You mean that haute couture take on Robocop that looked like it was designed by some Project Runway reject? It even made Robocop noises. (I affect a feminine voice.) Darling little precision whirs and clanks, with just a hint of whiney imperfection. And the amplified voice was so butch!

You just don't get it. You should never review another comic book movie.

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I've often thought that myself. I say to myself, You must be missing out on some indefinable magic, some rarefied essence. I keep hoping one day I'll discover that I've evolved, that I finally grasp the majesty, the sacred feng shui....

You don't even like comics, man.

Not true. I've read and enjoyed a lot of comics. Not so many, I admit, since I started shaving...but occasionally I indulge. And I've enjoyed some movies based on superhero comics. The original *Superman*, *Batman Begins*, and so forth. I just don't see the need to sink billions of dollars into crap like *Ghost Rider* and *Elektra* and like that. Most of them should be rated MC.

MC?

Mentally Challenged.

Your problem is, you don't have any kid in you. You can't sit back and have a good time at the movies.

Not when the movies suck... no.

That's *your* opinion.

Yeah, that's right. It's my opinion. It's your opinion I'm unclear about...unless "Iron Man's armor rocked" is the sum of it. Is there anything else you liked about the movie? Apart from the first hour, I mean.

Pepper Potts.

God, all she did was say lines like, "Hello." "Good-bye." "Do you want a muffin?"

What do you want? For her to deliver a speech on ethics? It's obvious she has a thing for Stark, but frowns on his warmongering. Because of that and his womanizing, she doesn't trust him. Paltrow did a good job of conveying that nonverbally. And she looked great. Jeff Bridges was a great bad guy!

Careful, Darryl. You're verging on a spoiler. Though it's debatable whether you can spoil something of *Iron Man*'s quality.

Okay. Jeff Bridges was good, too. It was a faithful adaptation. Everything I wanted in a comic book movie.

So you had no quibbles with it.

Sure I did. Like when Stark gets back to the States, the first thing he wants is a cheeseburger, so they stop off at Burger King and grab a sack of Whoppers. When I saw that I went, Burger King? If this guy needs a cheeseburger fix, he's going to hit a Carl's Junior. Get one of those six dollar jobs. Maybe with Portobello mushrooms. But there's people who think Burger King was the way to go — it lends Stark an All-American guy patina and makes his character more palatable. (A pause.) What's the matter?

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I was thinking about all the people who're going to watch this thing two or three times and buy the DVD and stare longingly at the cover image while fondling their genitals. It's really disturbing. You know what else is disturbing? Hollywood green-lighted a whole fresh batch of comic book movies after *Iron Man*'s massive opening weekend. Now we're going to get films like *Antman* and *Thor*. I bet they'll be good, huh? It's never going to end.

There's a reason for that. People love these movies because they illuminate the myths of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Oh, please! They aren't myths. They're wish-fulfillment fantasies for fourteen-year-olds...and primitively mounted ones at that. Then again, maybe you're right. It's a desperate age we live in, with a devalued intellectual currency. Maybe these are all the myths we've got...or the only myth, because they all tell the same basic story and have the same underlying purpose, to make the real world go away.

There's another reason why people go to these movies. They go for the same reason they go to Fry's (a chain of immense electronics stores in the NW), to check out state-of-the-art gear.

You mean it's a consumerist fetish?

Yeah...sorta. If you want to put a negative spin on it. Back in the Middle Ages they had the Sistine Chapel and stuff. Now we have these two-hundred million dollar movies that....

Gee, look at the time. I gotta run, Darryl. I need to decompress after all this heady talk.

A-hole!

Cretin!

Hey, Loosh! You going to *The Hulk*?

I hope not, but probably. I'm interested in seeing how far Tim Roth is willing to debase himself.

Can you get me into the screening?

I'll pick you up.

REMAKE CORNER

Due this fall is a film entitled *Quarantine*, the remake of a Spanish movie called *[Rec]*, yet another picture shot with a hand-held camera, directed by Jaume Balagueró. It's an intense, exceptionally frightening movie that few will see. Both an American release and the Spanish DVD have been suppressed in order that attention be focused on

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the inferior (judging by the trailer) remake.

The premise is this: A young TV reporter, Ángela (Manuela Velasco), is spending a night at a fire station, when a call comes in. She and her cameraman talk the firefighters into taking them along. When they arrive at the building from which the call was phoned in, they enter and soon find themselves (along with the entire building) sealed off from the outside world by sheets of thick plastic and a police guard who have been given orders to shoot anyone who tries to escape.

I'm not going to tell you a lot about this picture for fear of giving too much away, but I will say that thanks a good script, to Velasco's excellent performance as a reporter who does fluff pieces and is in over her head, and to deft direction, this is a must-see for all horror fans. It features the most realistic and least disorienting use of the hand-held technique, a fact that becomes evident when the cameraman sets his camera down to assist a person who's been injured and, apparently inadvertently, captures another intriguing moment. *[Rec]* can be watched via torrent and, though it's not as effective on a computer as on a regulation movie screen, it's nonetheless capable of generating an atmosphere of terror.

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Laurel Winter says she lives a magical life in Asheville, North Carolina, where she is happily involved with creative projects involving art & words & design & energy. Recent highlights include one son embarking on a racing career in California and the other son graduating from Oberlin with a triple major and highest honors. We're pleased to see her back in our pages after too long an absence.

~~Going Back~~ in ~~Time~~

By Laurel Winter

1.

AFTER RICHARD TOLD HER the whole quantum physics thing at the cocktail party, Ellie said, "I get it! We can go back in time."

"Go back in time," he repeated slowly, enjoying the attention, the perky camera-ready face tilted up at him. "Only one of those words has meaning."

2.

Richard had been studying quantum theory and metaphysics for twenty-three years so he was understandably jealous — even irked — when the weather girl in the little black dress went into an excited state after his five-cent pop tour of the quantum cosmos and echoed herself around the room, kissing him, slapping his face, grabbing a bottle of champagne and shaking it and spraying it ecstatically around the room.

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"Spooky action," she whispered in both of his ears at once, "at no great distance. This rocks!"

3.

"Since all wheres are here," Ellie said, pulling his cute little reading glasses from his inside suit pocket and perching them on her cute little nose, "that eliminates *go* as a meaningful word."

"You could say that," Richard started to say, but then there was another one of her beside her, jumping up and down.

"Time! *Time* has no meaning!"

"And *back*," said yet another, plucking the reading glasses from the first Ellie's nose and folding them neatly and putting them back in his pocket. "As used in that sentence anyway. As a time referent, *back* is nonsense."

"That leaves *in*."

"In the moment." "In synch." "In love." "In the flow." "In and out." Had one of them just grabbed his crotch?

4.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" she asked.

He had no idea what she meant by that.

5.

"That's for sleeping with Marcy," she said, when she slapped him.

Who was Marcy? he wondered.

6.

"Yes of course I will," she told him. "I have loved you since the beginning before the beginning. Since before the Big Bang — all those committee meetings. And remember Egypt. Remember France — well, forget France and Madame Guillotine; I am sorry about that." She caressed his head. "Remember Peru instead."

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He remembered nothing, although he desperately wanted to. "Please," he said, "tell me what is going on."

Ellie laughed and winked on and off and back on. "It's like play-dough and finger paints and mudpies."

7.

"One particle," she said. "Two slits." She rubbed her crotch — god that dress was short. "Want to play?"

8.

Richard was dizzy. All the Ellies — that was her name, right? — spinning and dancing and spraying champagne and talking physics as if it were a first language, as if it were slang, as if it were the babble of an infant.

She kissed him again. "Dear brilliant idiot. Stop thinking so hard."

9.

"I wish you could be here," she said, sobbing, clutching his lapels. "I wish you could let go. Just for an instant. One bloody here-and-now. That's all it would take. But you are too damned — whatever it is you are."

10.

And then he was alone, one cheek stinging red, doused with champagne and tears, Ellie-pink lipstick everywhere. The party continued around him. "Going back in time," he said, and wished for that. Just five minutes. A time loop.

11.

A young woman in a little black dress — accent on little — sashayed up to Richard. "I'm bored by lawyers and executives and our hostess tells me you're a hotshot physicist. Can you dumb it down to weather girl level? I'm Ellie."

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Our editors like to think that this issue features stories in a variety of styles or modes. There are several stories that would fit right in with The Twilight Zone *magazine if it were still around, one or two that might not be out of place in* The New Yorker, *some stories that would be appropriate for almost any science fiction magazine you could name, and a couple of yarns that might have been suitable for that groundbreaking fantasy magazine of the '40s,* Unknown. *We present you now a story that strikes us as being in a* Playboy *mode — a sexy, saucy tale that probably isn't suitable for our most tender readers. If you read* F&SF *with your kids or grandkids, save this one until after they're asleep.*

Mr. Bisson reports that his next two books are Planet of Mystery *and* Billy's Book, *both of which include material that first appeared in our pages.*

Private Eye

By Terry Bisson

"SPARE ONE OF THOSE?"

"Of course." I shook a Camel out of my pack, which was sitting on the bar as a reminder of better days. She was wearing a raincoat — Burberry; we notice such things — over jeans. It matched her hair, almost; it wasn't buttoned, only belted at the waist. She was three stools away, but I caught a glimpse of a narrow black strap on a narrow pale shoulder when she leaned down the bar to take the cigarette from my fingers.

We notice such things. Especially in a quiet bar on Eighth Avenue, on a rainy Thursday autumn-in-New York afternoon.

She was careful not to touch my fingers; I was careful not to touch hers. I have a lot of respect for cigarettes, these days.

"Thanks."

Her hair was what they used to call dirty blonde, cut short. Full, red lips and a low, smoky voice with eyes to match: dark, deep Jeanne Moreau eyes, filled with a certain sorrowful something. Regret? Loss? Perhaps. She was coasting, like me, on the high side of forty and her face looked it,

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which I found appealing, and her body didn't, which we find appealing. So many young girls have empty eyes.

"You're welcome," I said.

She sat back and examined the cigarette as if it were a fish she'd caught. Holding both ends in long fingers, very deft. Great hands. A dancer's hands.

Then she lit it!

She tapped it on the bar and put it between her lips and struck a match and lit it.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

I turned on my stool, alarmed, but the bartender was paying no attention. The little faux bistro — there's one on every block in the west twenties — was empty except for us.

"Excuse me," I said, sliding my drink down the bar and taking a seat next to hers. "But I thought you couldn't smoke in New York bars anymore."

"You can't," she said. "But Lou cuts me a pass every afternoon at about this time, when the lunch crowd's gone."

It was ten after two.

"Extraordinary," I said, tapping a Camel out of my pack. "Perhaps if I pretended to be with you, Lou would cut me a pass, too?"

"Depends." She eyed me sideways. "Are you a good pretender?"

"Good?" I contrived to sound insulted. "I'm the Great Pretender. Plus you'll probably want another anyway." I laid the pack down like a high card. Maybe even a trump, I was thinking.

"As long as we are pretending," she said. "Just don't get any ideas."

"Ideas?" My head was filled with ideas. "I never get ideas."

"I'm here to take a break," she said. "Not to get hit on. As long as you understand that, we can pretend we are friends. I'll even pretend to enjoy your company."

Not to mention my Camels.

"Not to mention your Camels," she added.

Lou did, indeed, cut me a pass. And she did enjoy my company, or at least pretend. And I hers. She was an "Internet worker bee" (or so she

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called it, then) who worked at home, right around the corner. I was, well, whatever I told her I was.

"Burberry," I said. "An old boyfriend?"

"All my boyfriends are old," she said. "The young are too needy."

"So many young girls have empty eyes," I said, and ordered us both a wine. White for her, red for me.

Her coat fell open when she leaned forward to pick up her glass. I saw the top of a slip, black silk, or something very like it. The strap was loose which told me that her breasts were probably small. But we couldn't see enough to tell.

"What is it with you guys and straps?" she asked, lighting another Camel off the one she was smoking. "It's not like you're actually *seeing* anything."

Busted. Even honesty is, sometimes, the best policy. "Extrapolation," I said.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Each part suggests the whole. That inch and a half of narrow strap, seen as if by accident, suggests the lacy cup to which it leads, which in turn suggests that which it cups, shapes, presents. That little strap takes the mind's eye to where the eye alone can't, quite, yet, go. Extrapolation."

"Well said," she said. I thought so too. She blew an almost-perfect smoke ring, then looked me straight in the eye and asked: "How many of you are there?"

Busted again. I glanced at my Fauxlex. "Sixty-seven, as of now. They come and go. How'd you know?"

"I read about it in *Wired*," she said. "Cyberhosting. Private Eyes. It's the new new thing. And a girl can tell. There's a certain — intensity of regard."

"Well said," I said. "And you don't mind?"

"On the contrary, it's kind of appealing." She leaned forward and the Burberry fell open, just enough. "Especially since *regard* is all that's involved."

"There are Protocols," I said. There was that lovely intimate little strap again. "Appropriate for just such an occasion."

"Well said," she said, sliding off her stool. "It's almost three. Tell you what: you may come up till five."

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She picked up my Camels and left the bar. Scarcely believing our luck, I touched my Fauxlex to the bill strip, beeped Lou a fifty to cover the tip, and followed.

HER NAME, SHE told me in the elevator, was Eula. I didn't realize, then, what it meant. Her place was a mess. It was a studio filled with computers, monitors, cables, drives, all the apparatus with which I am, ironically, so unfamiliar. One high window (dirty), one houseplant (dying), one futon couch facing a cluttered coffee table on a faded fake Persian rug.

With a nod, she sat me down on the rug. Then she slipped off her Burberry, hung it carefully on the back of a chair stacked with computer manuals, and disappeared into her tiny kitchen. She came back with two white-wine glasses and a bottle to match. Pinot Grigio.

She sat on the couch with her long legs tucked underneath her. "So you are cyberhosting," she said. "There was an article in *Playboy* too. What's it like, being a Private Eye? Been at it long?"

The strap, both straps, led down to a black slip with lacy cups tucked into tight, faded jeans. High end tank top.

"A few months," I said. "Nobody's been doing it long. It's a new technology, the nanobiotech thing. My clients log in and they see what I see."

She lit a Camel and tossed me my pack. "And that's it?"

"Private Eyes operate under very strict Protocols," I said. "No physical contact. My clients would be bounced off immediately, were I to touch even your fingertips. And I would be out of a job."

I had been wrong about her breasts. No bra, as far as we could tell. And we could almost tell.

"And that suits them — your clients?"

"It seems to. My clients are all lookers. See-onlys. Perhaps they have been disappointed in love. Perhaps a look is all they want."

"And yourself?" She shrugged one strap off one narrow shoulder. That made both shoulders, somehow, even more appealing.

"I'm kind of a looker myself."

"So I see." She blew a smoke ring. "But isn't it weird?"

"Being a looker?"

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"Having all those strangers lurking inside you."

"They're not actually inside me," I said. "It's virtual. A Private Eye is just a sender, that's all."

"They watch on a screen?"

"You must not have read the whole article; they just close their eyes. It's all bio, like I said. They suck on a chip and close their eyes and see what I see. Satellite link."

"A chip. Like hard candy. What if they swallow it?"

"They don't. All the sensories are in the mouth. You don't taste with your stomach, do you? Besides, it's rather expensive."

"I like that part," she said. "And where do you find them? These clients?"

"I don't have to. I have no idea who they are. They buy the chip at Circuit City and surf all the different Private Eyes."

"So it's a kind of competition."

"I suppose. I do okay. All I have to do is find a pretty girl to talk to."

"Or woman," she said. "And peep down her dress."

"Or her Burberry."

"And get paid for it."

"A modest sum," I said. "As long as I observe the Protocols. Plus I get expenses."

"The cigarettes." She kicked off her shoes, or rather slippers; or rather, pulled them off by the heels with long dancer's toes, one and then the other.

"I pay for the Camels," I said. "The bar tab goes through my Fauxlex. I only host on weekday afternoons, one to six."

"Free drinks," she said. She crossed her legs. Her jeans were pulled tight, making a wide V between her thighs. "And can they hear all this?"

"They're see-onlys," I said. "No sound, according to Private Eye."

"So they miss out on all the conversation?"

"They don't seem to mind."

"Am I suppose to be flattered?" she asked.

The apartment darkened as the afternoon light dimmed. We talked of mystery novels and Tenth Avenue bars, until she looked at her watch and sent me away.

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"It's five," she said at the door.

"What does that have to do with anything?" I was surprised to find I hadn't been pretending to enjoy her company.

"Protocols," she said, and shut the door.

"You're back," she said the next afternoon. Friday.

"By popular demand," I said, laying my Camels on the bar. I showed her the counter on my Fauxlex.

"Seventy. Your numbers are up. I suppose I should be flattered again."

"I suppose. I would be."

We bothered Lou just twice, once for wine and once for matches, before she headed upstairs and I followed, exactly at three.

"Don't you have a girlfriend?" she asked, in the elevator.

"I did and then I didn't," I said, following her into her studio. "You know how it goes."

"I do." She slipped off the Burberry and hung it on the chair before sitting down on the couch, across the low table from me.

"I find this more intimate anyway," I said. "Being a Private Eye."

"Not so very private," she reminded me. Instead of jeans over the slip, she wore black tights under it.

"And you don't mind?"

"On the contrary," she said. She stretched out one long dancer's leg and pulled the other up under her chin. "So where's your chip? Stick out your tongue and let me see."

"It's not a chip, it's a nanocoil." I tapped one eyebrow. "Wrapped around an optic dendrite. A painless laser insert, on a timer, like I said."

"Cool," she said. "And this three score and ten from one to six, do you feel them looking through your eyes?"

"I'm not supposed to, but there's a little feedback. When they see something they like, there is a kind of glow."

"So you can tell when they are pleased." She spread her thighs, a little.

"Sometimes. Like right now. They can see the pale outline of your panties through your tights, like a ghost, hiding in the shadows."

She held up two fingers and I lit a Camel for her.

"And they like ghosts," I added.

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"And you?"

"I like ghosts. And shadows, too." I leaned across the coffee table, and she took the cigarette between her fingers, being careful not to touch mine. It was an oddly intimate move.

"I see," she said. She stretched out her long legs and there was that ghost again. "And if those fingers had touched?"

"My coil would shut down. They would all go find another Private Eye."

"And you would be out of a job."

"It's only a part-time job," I said.

We do like ghosts. The afternoon light faded as we talked of de Kooning and Long Island wine, and cities we both knew, and some that we didn't.

Until exactly five, when she saw me out. In the elevator, and later, on the street, I felt my clients, like a flock of birds, departing into an autumn dusk.

I felt the glow fading.

I was sorry it was Friday.

It's only a part-time job, but I love it.

I miss it on weekends, when I'm off. Sometimes — okay, most of the time — I ramble around the Web, looking for the kind of women I look for when I'm working; the kind who like to be looked at.

Regarded with a certain intensity.

Still, I was surprised when I found her on the Web.

Eula-Cam. Live. Updated Daily, for Members Only.

I scrolled through the Free Stills, and there she was, sitting on the couch in her black slip over black tights, ghostly, talking to a guy on the rug.

His back was to the camera but I knew who it was.

Me.

"You might have told me," I said on Monday, laying my Camels on the bar.

"What?"

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"That we're in the same business." I raised two fingers and Lou brought two wines, one white, one red. "You're a jenni. A cam girl."

"Busted," she said. She was wearing the Burberry over the straps. But the jeans were gone, and the tights too. "You're a smart guy. I figured you would figure it out for yourself."

I considered that while we sipped and smoked. The bare legs were intriguing.

"I suppose I should be flattered," I said.

"I would be. Besides, we're not exactly in the same business, you know."

"We're not?"

"Your clients are looking *through* you. My clients are looking *at* me."

"So are mine," I said. "Which makes you the principal attraction. The main event. The feature presentation."

"Well said," she said. "Got a problem with that?"

I didn't have a problem with that.

"Me neither." She picked up my cigarettes and left. I beeped the bill strip and followed.

SHE SLIPPED out of the Burberry and hung it over the chair, carefully. I was looking over my shoulder.

"Looking for the cam? It's built into the TV," she said.

I saw it: a little green light, like an eye. There was a number underneath it: 04436.

"Those are your numbers? I'm impressed." I said. "But not surprised. It's on all the time?"

"It's green when it's on and it's on when I'm here. And I have to be here except between one and three, when I'm on break."

"MicroCam pays the rent?"

"That would be slavery," she said. She contrived to look insulted. "Or worse. I'm just paying off a debt."

She pointed at the computer in the corner. Even I had heard of the XLinteL99. It purred silently like an expensive cat.

"All I have to do is be myself. And, of course, observe the Protocols."

"And what are your Protocols?"

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"Quite strict. The Internet's not free anymore, you know. I'm on a soft-user open-public band. No nipples, no pubic hair; no nudity except when I'm alone."

"Alone with your four thousand guys," I reminded her, nodding toward the TV.

"And no visitors, except between three and five."

"I suppose I should be flattered," I said. And was.

"I suppose you should." She sat down on the couch across from me. As she crossed her legs I caught a glimpse of white panties. Not the ghost but the real thing.

"Sorry to disappoint," she said.

"Do I look disappointed?"

She pointed at my wrist. "Your numbers are down."

I checked my Fauxlex. Fifty-five. Then fifty-four.

"That's them, not me. They come and go. Maybe they don't like your Protocols."

"I thought you said they couldn't hear us."

"Maybe they can read lips," I said. Hers were deep red.

"Hope you don't get paid by the client."

I did but I didn't mind. She stretched out one leg and showed me her panties again. Narrow, silk, edged with lace. "It's more intimate, this way," I said. "Just us forty-two. And your four thousand."

"Five." She pointed at the TV: 05035. "You must be good for business." She leaned forward to set down her wine, holding the top of her slip closed with long fingers, like a card player hiding her hand. It was less than effective.

I felt a glow. I told her so.

"Even with your numbers down?"

"It must be my own."

We talked of movies and restaurants. We shared many favorites. It was not surprising. We were colleagues, in a way, after all.

At precisely five she saw me out. "Protocols."

I felt my clients departing, all thirty-four of them.

She was killing my business, but I didn't care.

I hurried home.

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Eula-Cam.

I scrolled through her Free Stills. There she was, carefully taking a cigarette from my fingers without touching them. Even though cams have no sound, I could hear her voice in my head. Low, smoky, intimate —

I clicked on the next Free Still.

She had just closed the door after seeing me out. I clicked again and she was starting to pull her slip off over her head. I happened to know she wasn't wearing a bra.

I clicked again, a little too eagerly, and a new screen came up: End User Licensing Agreement.

EULA.

I scrolled through it. All I wanted was to see her nipples. All it wanted was my credit card number, and my scout's honor that I was Over 18.

I almost clicked on *I Agree.*

Almost. Then I thought of the five thousand other guys and went to the movie instead. I saw Meg Ryan's nipples along with a hundred other guys.

I went to bed feeling lonely for the first time in months.

On Tuesday Lou brought two wines without asking, white and red. I tapped out two Camels.

"Eula," I said. "End User Licensing Agreement. I'm a little slow but I got it. What's your real name?"

"I'm not allowed to say," she said. "Protocols."

"Am I allowed to extrapolate?"

"Isn't that your specialty?" She leaned forward to get a light. The Burberry fell open and there was that dear little strap. But tight, not loose, and pink, not black. "But why extrapolate when you can see everything on the Web?"

"With five thousand other guys?" I lit her Camel for her. "I prefer the intimacy of a private conversation."

"Even when it ruins your business?" She pointed at my Fauxlex. It was down to twenty-one.

"It's not a business," I said. "It's a part-time job."

"I suppose I should be flattered," she said, picking up my cigarettes.

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It was 2:55. "I suppose you should," I said. I beeped the bill strip and followed.

I sat down on the rug and watched while she spread her Burberry carefully over the back of its chair.

She wore a black half slip and a little pink brassiere. Cups edged with lace.

I checked the TV. The green light was on and the counter under it read 06564.

"So why are they here?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Your clients. Why are they even logged on when I am here? A visitor. They must know your Protocols."

"You seem to resent them," she said.

"The Protocols?"

"The clients."

I did but said I didn't. She was working, after all, just like me.

"Maybe they're romantics," she said. "It must be the suspense. Protocols are all about suspense."

"So are bras," I said. Her pink cups were not so little after all.

"Extrapolating again?" She sat on the couch, pulling the slip down between her thighs. "What is it with you guys and bras, anyway?"

"The brassiere," I said, pouring us both a glass of Pinot Grigio, "is the most romantic invention of western civilization."

"Next to the Web."

"Better. The brassiere is itself a kind of web. It traps guys. It's a kind of Protocol. It restricts, restrains. It shapes and displays that which it conceals. It focuses the regard. It presents."

"Well said," she said, adjusting her cups, first one and then the other. "Plus it keeps the green light on."

We both looked at the TV. 07865.

"Were it to come off," she said, "the light would go red and they would all be gone." She reached out for a cigarette.

"I wouldn't miss them," I said. I gave her one and lit it, being careful not to touch her fingers with my own.

"I might," she said. "They're paying for my XLinteL99."

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We talked of sports and sonnets and she saw me out at five.

I felt my clients departing, all eighteen of them. I still could feel the glow.

Eula-Cam.

I scrolled through her Free Stills until I was gone. She was on the couch, alone, in bra and panties, putting on lipstick. The label said Deep Rose.

I clicked. She was reaching behind her back with long fingers to unhook her bra.

I clicked again and I was at the end of the Free Stills.

END USER LICENSE AGREEMENT.

I almost clicked on *I Agree*. Then I thought of the seven thousand other guys. She was taking it off for them.

I was beginning to hate them, every one.

The next day she was late, for the first time. "Where you been?"

"A girl likes to shop," she said.

"On the house," said Lou, setting down two glasses, one white, one red.

"Down to seven," she said, checking out my Fauxlex as I lit her Camel. "They're jumping ship. And yet, you're back."

"They're a fickle bunch," I said. "They like excitement. Nudity. Nipples at least."

"And you don't?"

"I'm a romantic, remember? Intimacy's my thing."

"Hard candy's mine," she said, puckering her lips. "That's what I was shopping for."

I followed her upstairs. She folded her Burberry over the chair and let me watch her walk across the room in bra and panties. It was a different bra. I could see her nipples through it.

Round little shadows. "Doesn't count," she said, looking down approvingly. "As long as they're covered."

"Protocols," I said. Her panties were sheer too, except for the little triangle that barely covered her pubic hair. Even with just eight clients — no, nine — I was glowing like a stove.

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"Now they're back," she said, leaning over me to glance at my Fauxlex. "What is it with you guys and panties, anyway?" She sat down on the couch with her feet pulled up underneath her and her knees just slightly apart.

"Honey, do you have to ask?" I thought that was clever.

Instead of answering, she closed her eyes and leaned way back.

"It's the little triangle," I said. White silk, or something very like it, pulled tight between her thighs. "It's like the pubic hair I'm not allowed to see. It says, *Here.*"

"Well said," she said, lifting one leg and hugging her knee to her breast. The triangle narrowed to a soft white lane that led down out of sight. The silk road.

Her eyes were closed. Mine were wide. I felt a glow.

"They present. Like the brassiere, they display what they conceal," I said. "There's a certain intimacy in the presentation."

"And in the regard as well," she said, her eyes still closed.

I supposed I should be flattered.

"Indeed, you should," she said. She opened her eyes and reached out for a Camel, carefully, and we shared the wine and talked of cabbages and kings.

The silk road faded in the failing light.

At five she showed me out, and I felt my clients fleeing. All but one. He stayed with me till six, and so did the glow.

Eula Cam.

I clicked through Free Stills, and there she was in bra and panties, seeing me out. Closing the door with the fingertips I had never touched.

I could almost hear her saying, "Tomorrow, then?"

Tomorrow, then.

I clicked again and those same fingertips were inside the waistband of her panties, about to slip them down.

I clicked again and the EULA filled the screen.

I wasn't even tempted to click on *I Agree.* It wasn't what I wanted.

I clicked BACK until I found her putting on her lipstick.

Deep Rose.

I left it there. What I wanted was to read her lips with mine.

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* * *

"What's with the hard candy," I said. "Are you trying to quit smoking?"

"Hardly." She reached for my Camels, tapping the pack on the bar. "A girl likes to have something to suck."

"Sorry, guys," said Lou. "I got a complaint. You'll have to take the cigarettes outside."

"We have to talk," I said, outside. "I'm thinking of quitting my job."

"I've been thinking too," she said, in the elevator, looking up at me. I leaned over to kiss her but she stepped back, just one step.

The elevator door opened.

"Don't do anything rash," she said, glancing at my Fauxlex. "You still have one client left."

I was feeling rash. "I'm feeling rash," I said.

"It's a sort of new feeling, isn't it," she said, hanging the Burberry carefully over its chair. "For such as us."

I nodded. She was wearing little pink panties, and the not-so-little pink bra. The original again. I sat down on the rug and checked the TV.

9865.

"You could make them go away," I said.

"Too soon," she said. She pointed at the TV: 9904. "My XLinteL99 is not quite paid for."

"I can help," I said. "How much do you owe?"

"You're already helping," she said, sitting down on the couch across from me. She opened her thighs to show me her little silk road.

"I want to be alone with you," I said. "Is that too much to ask?"

"What about your cyberhosting job? You still have one client left."

"I know how to get rid of him," I said. I reached for her hand but she pulled it back. Teasing me?

"Not so fast," she said. "Look."

We both looked. 10007.

"Now we can talk alone."

She reached behind her back to unhook her bra, the most intimate of moves. It would be ungentlemanly to say just what she showed me; and more ungentlemanly still to deny the glow they gave me.

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The light on the TV was green at 10011, 10012, then suddenly red. 00000.

"Alone at last," she said. "My XLinteL99 is finally paid off. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Read my lips," I said, getting up from the rug. "I still have one client to get rid of. And I know how to do it."

I reached for her hand but she pulled it back. "Not so fast," she said. "I have something to show your last client. A little farewell gift. I want you to feel the glow."

She slipped her fingertips under the waistband of her panties, just like in the still, and pulled them off. She lay back on the couch with her eyes closed. "You always said you were sort of a looker."

I sat back down. Her very white thighs were opened, very wide.

"You're something of a looker too," I said. It was only one client, but the glow was strong.

"I suppose I am," she said. She reached out to take my hand and the glow was gone as my last client was bounced. Replaced by a stronger, more intimate glow.

"I like this glow better," I said, and I kissed her.

And she kissed me. Our tongues played chase in her mouth and then in mine, and then —

"What's this?" I said. Mumbled.

She spit it out, delicately, into her hand.

It was a chip. Why was I not surprised?

"Double the pleasure," she said, tossing it onto the rug. "And double the fun. Now come here."

I came there.

FIVE O'CLOCK came and went. She put on her lipstick, a touch-up, and that was all. Deep Rose.

"It's Rose," I said. "Your name. I finally got it."

"I was beginning to wonder," she said, pulling on her panties and lighting a Camel, our last one. It was also white. She left off the little pink brassiere.

Her not so little nipples were also pink. Wet pink now.

"I guess we're both out of a job," she said. "What now?"

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"You mean forever, or this evening?" I asked. I took the cigarette from her fingers, being careful to touch them as I did.

"Both," she said. "Let's start with this evening."

"For that, my sweet Rose," I said, "there are Protocols."

For once she looked worried. "Protocols?"

"Chinese or Thai?" I said. "Eat out or order in?"

"Thai," she said, smiling. "And I'd hate to have to dress for dinner."

"*I Agree*," I said, picking up the phone.

December 22, 2012

By Sophie M. White

This wasn't supposed to happen.

I had climbing roses tattooed
Down my spine
And I got so many piercings
My earlobes stretched
Halfway to my shoulders.

I helped one neighbor's Chihuahua
Get to another neighbor's Rottweiler
And I loaned my garage
To a death metal band.

But this wasn't supposed to happen.

The Mayans, Mother Shipton,
And a handful of web sites said
Yesterday's the Last Day,
The Final Curtain, the END.
Why shouldn't I have listened?

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Carol Emshwiller's fiction first graced our pages some fifty-two years ago. Over the years, she has contributed memorable stories such as "Pelt," "Acceptance Speech," and "Creature." Her latest story is an engaging and charming take on the themes of identity and memory.

Whoever

By Carol Emshwiller

I FORGOT WHO I WAS. I suppose it's just as well. This doorway, where I lie, is dirty. *If* this doorway is my doorway and *if* I'm dressed as I usually dress, then I can't have been a very respectable person. First thing I'll do, I'll go get something else to wear and then I'll find a good place to live. Something more like the new me. If this is a new me.

I wonder what I look like. My hands seem strong. My fingernails are clean. I'm not too fat. Am I the same sex I used to be?

Did I actually wipe out my own mind in order to start from scratch? Did I do it deliberately or was it by mistake? But what a good idea! I'm glad I thought of it. I probably got sick and tired of the way things were back in my former life.

But first I have to find a mirror to see who I am now. Or a shop window.

I get up and brush myself off. I feel a little wobbly but I don't want to stay here. Thank goodness nobody saw me lying in this dirty doorway. At least I hope nobody did.

I walk along beside the shops. I glance at myself but just every now

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and then. I don't let myself stand and stare at me. I don't want to be too open about it. People would think things.

What I see is a woman, not young. That figures. I'm exactly the age when it's logical to want to change your life. There's still a bit of a future in front of me.

But what about this town? It looks a little strange, though maybe it's just my nice new view of everything.

And what is the language here? I heard somebody passing by and I couldn't understand a word she said. Of course that doesn't mean anything. She could be a foreigner. I wonder what language I'm thinking in. Wouldn't it be nice if it was French? I wonder how many languages I know. How do you find out a thing like that?

I wonder what other things I might be good at. I might even be able to play the piano. I wonder if I can find a piano and check on myself. Can I paint and draw? Can I ride a horse?

Should I try some skill right now? But there's no handy piano. I'd like, if not the piano, then the violin. I hope I don't know how to play the banjo. I want a higher class life.

I cross the street to a newspaper stand and look at the headlines. I don't recognize the writing. Have I forgotten how to read?

Well, I wanted a whole new start — at least I *think* I did, and what better way than to appear right here knowing absolutely nothing? Just think, I can be anybody I want.

I should start planning right now. I wish I had a notebook. I'd start writing down possible ways to be. I can even pick what age I think I am. I'll say forty. Or better yet, thirty-nine.

But this is bothersome. I'm hungry. How am I going to get something to eat? I looked in all my pockets. I don't have any money of any sort. Not even in my bra.

Is it just like my old self to run out without any money? Or was I in a hurry to escape from a husband and didn't have time to get my money? Maybe I need to change my looks in case of being recognized.

I don't have a single bit of identification. Though, if this is to be a whole new life, why would I care? Except it's disconcerting. Too much freedom. Maybe I should have started more gradually — changed myself little by little, one step at a time. I jumped into things without thinking.

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That shows what I used to be like. I just left myself here in my oldest clothes.

But I shouldn't be too judgmental of my old self. Perhaps I had my reasons. What if I had too many children and was trying to get away? Maybe only for an afternoon? I must have thought: How nice to be all alone. I should enjoy it. And I do. But I shouldn't have gone quite this far. That old me must have been impetuous — probably always in a hurry.

I start walking — a nice fast clip. Thank goodness my former self is in pretty good shape. I can't wait until I come upon a piano or a violin.

This seems to be a big town. Perhaps I thought I could get lost here. I'd better watch out. Somebody may come along and take me back to a family full of children.

I walk faster. I take a sharp turn. I double back on myself just in case I'm being followed. (If I find myself wobbling, I want it to be in a nice clean fancy doorway.) I avoid everybody that walks near me and looks suspicious and lots do. It makes my progress slow what with all this doubling back. Of course I don't know where I'm heading, anyway. Just out of here.

When a large chubby man looks at me as if he might know me, I duck into a dusty little bookstore. Thank goodness the man walks on.

But a bookstore is just what I want. I need a notebook.

There's only one man in there sitting at a cluttered desk near the front. He's skinny and ugly — graying and balding. I'm quite taken with him.

He says, "Good morning," without looking up. And in my language.

"Do you have, perhaps, a shopworn notebook you were going to throw out and the nubbin of a pencil you could spare? I'd like to pay but I've mislaid my money."

He looks up, suspicious. Studies me. I must look honest, or maybe just pitiful, because he says, "Of course." He finds a nice new notebook and a really good pencil.

"Oh, these are much too good. Please, just something worn out."

"That's all right. I can spare them."

What a nice man. I decide to tell...well, not all, but some. "I'm starting over. I need to make a list of all the new things I want in my life."

"I guess we all do that at certain times in our lives."

It occurs to me that I'll need a name. I'd better think of one I like.

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Isabel? Charlotte? Lillian? I suspect that those are names I always wished I had even before I forgot who I was.

"My name is Geraldine. I play the piano."

Oh, well, he'll never find out. Maybe I'll not ever find out either. Perhaps rather than looking for a piano, I should avoid them.

I wonder if I can get him to ask me out to lunch.

"Is there someplace where I can sit and write in my new notebook? A diner or café where they'd let me sit without buying anything? As I said..." (I'm making a point of it) "...I haven't a cent."

And it happens just as I want it to.

"If you can wait until my helper comes, she takes over for an hour at noon, I'll take you out to lunch. Don't worry, I'll keep quiet so you can write."

Perhaps he's as taken with me as I am with him.

I say, "I don't usually dress this way, you know. I had to leave in a hurry."

Of course he's not dressed all that well himself. His jacket is quite threadbare.

"I used to have a nice silk scarf, all tans and browns and yellows." (I wonder if I really did.) "I wish I'd brought it. I feel funny in these clothes."

"It's not a fancy place, but they let you sit as long as you want if you buy something first."

WE SIT BY THE WINDOW. He watches the people going by outside while I open the notebook as if I'm getting ready to make notes. But what to write? That I'm feeling so good about this new life? That already good things are happening? But, in case he looks, I don't want him to see anything like that. Instead I write: PIANO, PRACTICE!!!!

If I were writing this for me I should be writing something like: make money. Maybe: Find my talents and skills. Maybe: Must find place to sleep tonight.

But, anyway, right now I'd rather talk. I say, "I used to always be on the go. I never stopped to think before I did something."

I write: THINK three times with several exclamation points.

"Do you think writing it down will help?"

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He shrugs.

I say, "I've swept away my past." I say, "Have we met before?" I say, "I do love books."

My new self talks and talks.

I think to write: STOP TALKING, but instead I stop. I write: THINK!!! a few more times.

I hope he doesn't ask me where I'm from. Where should I say? Perhaps I'm from some other time. Like from the future. Perhaps I can bring these people new technology they've not conceived of. I hope I'm not from the past. How does one find out a thing like that? Finding out if I play the piano will be a lot easier.

I say, "I'm going to call my notebook: The Diary of Lost Time."

I say, "But what about you? Do you, as do I, play the piano?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. I've strummed a guitar a bit a long time ago. Most people have."

He hunches over his tea as if he's a too tall man trying to look smaller though he's hardly taller than I am.

"Are you a poet? You look like a poet."

"I used to...now and then, but not much anymore."

I feel a sudden yearning. For what? Nostalgia for my unknown past? For my past that was in the future? I yearn to tell him, "I'm from the future. Or maybe from the past," but I know better than to say any such thing. Tears come to my eyes. I wish I was back where I belong wherever or whenever that is. I take a big drink of tea. I wipe my eyes while pretending to wipe my mouth.

He's saying, "...so that's all about me. Not much."

"Oh that's very interesting."

"Here's the scar," he says, and pulls up his pants leg.

"Oh, my."

But he has to get back to the bookstore. He tells me if I want a quiet place to write I can come with him and sit in the back room.

I sit in the little cluttered room and try to forget about money and where I might have to sleep tonight. I write GERALDINE on the front of my notebook so I can check on it if I forget what I told him. I'm sure he told me his name but I don't remember.

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On the first page I write: WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT MY SKILLS? I sit still and think. What do I know about the future? Are there any tests for finding out when one comes from? I think as hard as I can but I don't come up with any answers. I've hardly made a single note.

When I hear customers in the front part of the store, I snoop around. I find several coins in a drawer. I find half a peanut brittle bar. I take them.

Did I used to steal things? Maybe this is my usual way. I hope it isn't. No wonder I decided to start over.

I simply will not ask for any more help from this man. He's just too nice.

I gather up my things — into a plastic bag with the name of the bookstore on it — and walk to the front. I guess I look like I'm leaving because he stops me.

"It's cooling off. Don't you have a sweater?"

I don't know what to answer.

"You don't, do you?"

"I'll be all right."

"It looks like rain, too. I can't invite you home with me. My place is too small, but if you want, you can stay here. It won't be very comfortable but there's a cot in the store room. I hate to see anybody homeless."

Of course anybody from the future has got to be homeless. Did he guess where I'm from?

"What can I do for you? Any knowledge? Any skills I may have that might be useful?"

"One of these days you can play the piano for me."

"I'll do that. I promise."

He locks me in...so to speak. I can get out if I need to but I can't lock up after myself if I leave so I shouldn't.

I sit down again with my notebook and think about the future. I can't tell if I really am from there or not. Maybe I could if I could see the new buildings of this time to see just how new they are, but this is an old part of town. There always are old parts that are just the same as hundreds of years ago. They do still have cars. Though in this neighborhood they seem rather grungy. I can think of a car that's shaped like a bubble. I can think

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of walkways over roads so nobody ever has to cross the street. (But are we still walking across streets in the future?)

I appeared without a newspaper with a date, though why would we still have newspapers in the future? I seem to remember they were dying. I suppose bookstores are, too. (That's why this funny little dusty one.) I arrived with nothing except my clothes. It's a wonder I didn't come through naked. And of course I would be homeless. Anybody coming from the future would be. I need to accept help. I shouldn't feel so bad about having to accept kindness from this man. Without people like him none of us time travelers would be able to get along at all.

Do we still have pianos in the future?

Oh my God, do I need to remember that dirty doorway where I first arrived in order to get back to my real present time? Is that what they call the portal? I don't think I can find it.

I lie down but I can't sleep. I'm thinking how, even if I really am from the future, there's nothing I can teach anybody. I don't even know how to make old things. I couldn't make a printing press, or especially not a flute what with all those valves. I couldn't even hang a door, frame a window.... Light bulbs! Actually I don't even know how to make a candle.

I'm having a terrible night. But I'm going to leave before he comes back. He said he'd be here at 8:30 but I'll be gone. He's done enough. Other people should help the woman from the future.

(Before I try to get back to the portal, should I try to find a piano? Middle C. Why do I know that?)

Except I'm not gone. I finally fall asleep and don't wake up until after eleven. He's brought me coffee and a muffin and opened the shop long ago. The coffee's cold, but still good.

I wish I could remember his name. It must be in here somewhere. While he's busy I snoop around again.

Then I hear the front door slam...hard. I go out and see a man come in who looks like he doesn't belong here. The bookstore man and I both know it. We look at each other. The man is burly and frowning. He's like those men I tried to avoid yesterday. He wanders around, pretending to look at titles. Is he going to buy something or just walk around? Or is this a stickup? If I'm really from the future I ought to be able to do something

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these people wouldn't think of. Or maybe he came for me. Maybe he's one of those men I was trying to avoid all day yesterday.

But I shouldn't jump to conclusions. That would be just like my old impetuous self.

He comes close to me and whispers, "What in the world are you thinking?"

I have no idea what he means.

I tell him this must be a case of mistaken identity.

He grabs my arm. So hard it hurts. "Come on," he says.

Does he want to take me back to my present? I mean back to my present in the future.

"Do I mean something to you?"

"I'd never have thought to see you in a bookstore."

"Don't we have books where we come from?"

The odd thing is, the bookstore man is bald and ugly and this man is handsome, even to a full head of curly black hair, but I don't like his looks at all.

The bookstore man says, "Can I help you?" Politely, as if the man might want to buy a book. But the man doesn't let go of me and doesn't stop trying to pull me out the door.

Do people from the future know how to fight? Do I? I wonder if I ever knew karate or any such thing. For all I know about myself, I could be an expert.

On the other hand, maybe this handsome revolting man can help me get back to the future. I don't know which side I ought to be on. Of course here I don't have a place to be or a life at all, though I do have a start.

But I wouldn't want anything to happen to the bookstore man.

The bookstore man tries to help me pull away, but the big man swings me around as if I was a weapon and knocks the bookstore man down. A lot of books go down, too — a whole shelf full, and I'm down, but I'm free. The floor is slippery with books. The bookstore man gets up and tries to punch the big man.

I'm thinking: Stop wondering if you know karate. Respond automatically just as if you did.

I wait for my chance and then give a good kick right where it hurts the most and when the big man is dealing with that, I push him over backward.

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I'm thinking: Any minute he's going to disappear into the future but he doesn't. He staggers up and looks at me, surprised. As he leaves he says, "Well, stay here, then."

After our adventure the bookstore man and I hug and the bookstore man gives me a *very* nice little peck on the cheek. Then we prop up the bookcase and put the books back.

To celebrate we go out to a piano bar. It's early. Hardly anybody is there. Now's my chance. I mean I was pretty good at karate or whatever that was. I tell myself to do just as I did when I kicked and pushed the big man. I didn't think at all and everything came out just right.

I sit down at the piano. There's Chopin. There's Bach. There's Mozart. Do I know them or are they just names I've heard before? I put my hands on the keys. I spread my fingers. There's my middle C right in front. ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HOPE YOU have enjoyed our Fifty-ninth Anniversary Issue.

We've decided our big Six-Oh deserves more than just one special issue — we're going to celebrate throughout the year. So starting next month, we're going to run a classic reprint in each issue. These stories are going to be selected and introduced by various *F&SF* editors and staffers from our history. Which story will we run next month? Tune in and see!

We also conducted a little competition for the cover of our anniversary issue and let artists submit their best work. The winners from this competition will run throughout the year. Next month we'll have a fine entry from Bob Eggleton.

All these festivities have left the actual lineup for our December issue in flux, but we know for certain that we'll have a new story by John Langan next month. In "How the Day Runs Down," Mr. Langan gives us another literary take on one of the great themes of horror fiction — in this case, it's zombies.

Other stories coming soon include Jerry Oltion's "All in Fun," Eugene Mirabelli's "Falling Angel," and "The Minutemen's Witch" by Charles Coleman Finlay. Subscribe now and you'll get these stories and many more great tales throughout the year.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

ROCKS IN SPACE

ON November 20, 2007, Andrea Boattini of the University of Arizona's Catalina Sky Survey spotted an extremely faint object moving across the stars. The story of that object — an Apollo asteroid named 2007WD5 — had the makings of a science fiction thriller. Unfortunately for fans of conventional thriller structure (a form marked by mounting tension), most of the story was over by the time Boattini discovered WD5.

Every four years this asteroid — a rock measuring about fifty meters in diameter — drops in from the asteroid belt to cross the Earth's orbit. On November 1, 2007, WD5 had zipped by the Earth at a distance of 7.5 million kilometers, just thirty times farther away than the Moon — a near miss by astronomical standards.

In any thriller worth its salt, one hair's-breadth escape is quickly followed by another. Shortly after Boattini spotted WD5, astronomers at NASA's Near Earth Object program realized that this asteroid was going to pass very close to Mars on its return to the asteroid belt. In fact, there was a chance that the asteroid might collide with the planet — exciting news for anyone interested in cratering and planetary impacts. If WD5 hit Mars, scientists estimated it would make a crater about a kilometer in diameter and 200 meters deep. High-resolution orbiting cameras circling Mars were poised to provide a ringside seat to the aftermath of the impact.

When news of the possible impact went out, the Exploratorium in San Francisco sprang into action, preparing to create a webcast of the impact if it happened. Alas (for the Exploratorium, astronomers, and disaster enthusiasts everywhere), the asteroid passed close to — but missed colliding with — Mars on

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January 30, 2008. WD5 passed so close to Mars that the asteroid's orbit was disturbed by the gravitational interaction. Astronomers have lost track of WD5 for now, but they expect that it will return in four years.

But we're not willing to wait four years to share all the research Paul did about what happens when an asteroid bashes into a planet. Scientists and science fiction writers are both in the business of asking "What would happen if...?" In this case, we'll take a look at what would have happened if WD5 had struck the Earth or Mars.

Belly Flops and Asteroid Impacts

If you've read Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, you already know that an asteroid hitting the Earth will mess things up in the immediate vicinity of the impact. In that novel, moon colonists use a catapult to "throw rocks" — really big rocks — at the Earth.

But if you're like us, you're curious about exactly how destructive that impact will be. We can help you there. The level of destruction depends on three factors: what makes up the asteroid, how big it is, and how fast it's traveling.

Natural objects that are likely to strike a planet come in three major flavors: ice, iron, and stone. Each type of object behaves differently on hitting the planet's atmosphere, if it has one. We'll start close to home and consider what happens to an object entering Earth's atmosphere.

To appreciate what happens when an object hits the atmosphere, remember the last time you did a belly flop. If you fell flat into the water from the edge of the pool, the water welcomed you with a soft gentle splash. If, however, the flop was the result of a bad dive from a platform that's ten meters (thirty feet) above the water, you probably remember the pain to this day. (Paul certainly does!)

At slow impact speeds, it takes small forces to accelerate the water out of your way. At higher speeds, it takes extremely high forces. Diving from the higher platform, you hit the water a lot faster. Your body exerts a lot of force on the water. Newton's third law (For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction) dictates that when your body slaps the water, the water also slaps your body — a nasty example of physics in action.

Remember the pain of your last belly flop as you consider a space

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object striking the Earth's atmosphere. That object is experiencing a similar situation. The molecules in the air have no warning. Suddenly — "Wham!" — they are hit by the object! In keeping with Newton's third law, the air molecules hit back, exerting large forces on the object. One of those forces, the friction of the object passing through the atmosphere, heats the object's surface to incandescent temperatures — so hot that the object emits light. That bright light is what we see from Earth as a falling star or meteor.

The forces on the object may also break it apart or rip off pieces as it travels. (Search YouTube for "meteor" to see some exciting footage of incandescent meteors breaking apart and shedding bits as they travel.)

Let's get back to the three flavors of objects that might collide with Earth. Most icy bodies disintegrate in the atmosphere. They fall apart and melt long before they reach the Earth's surface.

Iron meteorites, on the other hand, are strong enough to hold together in large pieces despite the forces and the heat. Pieces of iron meteorites strike the Earth regularly. In fact, if you have access to the output of the downspout of a building, you can collect iron meteorite particles. Get a magnet (a refrigerator magnet will do fine) and paint it white. Place the magnet where water from the downspout will pour across it.

After a rainstorm, check the magnet for small black specks. Many of those specks are tiny iron meteorite particles that fell onto your roof and paused there until the rain flushed them onto your magnetic trap.

But don't let those cute little meteorites lull you into feeling all warm and cuddly about rocks that fall from the sky. Meteor Crater in Arizona was made by an iron meteorite about fifty meters in diameter — approximately the size of WD5. (Be happy that one didn't land on your roof!)

As a rule of thumb, an object impacting Earth will make a crater that's about twenty times the diameter of the impacting object. Meteor Crater follows this rule, measuring about 800 meters in diameter. (For a more precise estimate of the size of a crater produced by a meteorite impact, the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory has a website that allow you to calculate the size of the crater made by an object of a specific diameter and speed. See *http://www.lpl.arizona.edu/tekton/crater.html*.)

The third flavor — the rocky

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asteroid — is stronger than ice but weaker than iron. Like icy bodies, most rocky asteroids don't ever reach the ground. The forces resulting from impact with the atmosphere are large enough to break the rock into pieces. Each new piece is then exposed to collisions with more air, which breaks it up. This continues in a cascade so that the rocky object is pulverized high in the atmosphere.

How can we say this with such confidence? Well, we have a pretty good idea of what happens when a rocky asteroid of that size hits the Earth, since it happened near Tunguska, Siberia back in 1908. We'll get back to that in a minute.

How Fast? How Big?

As we said before, an asteroid hitting the Earth will create a mess in the spot it hits. One way to measure the expected destruction is to estimate the energy of the object as it strikes the atmosphere and the surface of the Earth. To do that, you need to know the object's mass and speed. When an asteroid is in motion, its kinetic energy is proportional to the mass of the asteroid times its speed squared.

There are two parts to the velocity of an object that will hit the Earth: the velocity it gains by falling into Earth's gravity well (about eleven kilometers per second or seven miles per second) and its orbital velocity around the sun relative to the Earth. Suppose an object has the same orbit as the Earth and is orbiting at about the same speed as the Earth (about thirty kilometers per second or twenty miles per second). If it's traveling in the same direction as Earth, it could slowly overtake the Earth, in which case it will drop in from nearly rest and have the lowest possible speed of impact — about eleven kilometers per second.

At the other extreme, an asteroid might have the same orbit as Earth, traveling in the opposite direction. The speed that an orbiting object travels depends on the mass of the body it's orbiting (in this case, the sun) and the radius of its orbit (about 150,000,000 kilometers). So the asteroid that's in Earth orbit will be traveling at thirty kilometers per second, the same speed as the Earth. That asteroid could collide with Earth head-on, in which case it will start falling into the Earth with a velocity of sixty kilometers per second.

But an asteroid does not have to be in the same orbit as the Earth. It could drop in from the outer solar

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system, as WD5 did. Such an asteroid can be moving faster than an asteroid in Earth orbit — racing along at more than forty kilometers per second. If a such a rock hits the Earth head on, its forty plus kilometers per second velocity will add to the Earth's thirty kilometers per second orbital velocity producing the fastest speeds we see for meteors: seventy kilometers per second. Such an object enters the atmosphere at over Mach 200, more than 200 times the speed of sound.

Compared to the speed of these falling rocks, the speed of sound in air is positively glacial. Sound pokes along at a mere 350 meters per second or just 0.35 kilometers per second (700 miles per hour depending on altitude). The speeds at which objects hit the Earth range from 30 to over 200 times the speed of sound.

Combine these tremendous speeds with a substantial mass and you've got a lot of destructive potential. WD5 massed about a billion kilograms and would have hit the Earth at about twenty kilometers per second or 50,000 miles per hour. (Just for reference, that's fifty times the speed of sound or mach 50.) Calculate the kinetic energy of WD5, and you'll get many megatons — the energy of a large hydrogen bomb!

Ground Zero — Siberia

That brings us to Tunguska, a region of Siberia known mainly for peat bogs and pine forests. According to eyewitness accounts in 1908, a bright, flaming object came down from the sky at an angle, followed by a giant bright blast. The heat wave and wind blast flattened huts and trees for 800 square miles. Forty miles from the impact site, windows shattered, ceilings collapsed, and people and livestock went flying. Hundreds of miles away, the Earth shook and people heard the "thunderclaps" of the impact.

Recent supercomputer simulations of the Tunguska collision made at Sandia National Laboratory (*http://www.sandia.gov/news/resources/releases/2007/asteroid.html*) produced movies of a simulated Tunguska impact that look like works of modern abstract art. These simulations have helped scientists understand what happens during such an impact.

Scientists figure that a rock measuring fifty meters in diameter was pulverized in the atmosphere high above the ground. This explains why no one finds large pieces of the Tunguska object scattered over the ground, although tiny

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pieces have been found embedded in trees.

The rock's energy was released as an explosion that was the equivalent of a five-megaton nuclear bomb high in the atmosphere. Originally, scientists had estimated that the explosion at Tunguska was closer to twenty megatons. They revised their estimates as they gained a better understanding of how the energy of the blast spread. A five-megaton explosion requires a smaller rock than the twenty-megaton explosion. This is an important distinction since small rocks in space are much more common than larger ones. So Tunguska-like collisions may be more common than we thought. That's one reason we are glad that NASA pays the folks at the Catalina Observatory to watch the skies for us. (Paul suspects that government agencies are keeping watch for nuclear-sized explosions around the Earth, and hears rumors that they may pick up one large nuclear bomb equivalent blast per year due to rocks from space striking the atmosphere.)

What about Mars?

To understand what happens when an asteroid hits Mars, you need to remember that Mars has only 1/100 the atmosphere of Earth. You have to go up forty kilometers above the surface of the Earth to enter air with the same density as gas at the surface of Mars. Without the atmosphere to break them up, much smaller rocks can make it to the surface of Mars.

The spacecraft with high-resolution cameras that orbit Mars have documented more than twenty new impact craters that have formed in the last decade. These Martian craters tend to be twenty-five meters or so in diameter, which means that they were made by falling rocks as small as one meter in diameter.

The creation of twenty-five-meter-wide craters on Mars is common. Scientists say that if you lived on Mars for a decade you would hear or feel the shockwaves from an impact. Thank goodness our atmosphere protects us on Earth.

Throwing Rocks, Making Craters

Before we describe the actual impact on Mars, let's pause to make some craters. (We know that all this talk about falling rocks has made you want to throw some.)

At NASA, scientists study cratering made by hypervelocity impactors by using an extremely

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high-speed gun. Paul develops activities for middle school science students and decided rather quickly that arming students with a hypervelocity gun might be unwise. So he did some experimentation and discovered a safer model of crater formation.

The key ingredient to Paul's model is table salt. Take a plastic tray at least five centimeters (two inches) deep and a foot in diameter. (Garden supply stores sell trays like this to place under potted plants.) Fill the tray full of table salt. (In an interesting tangent, Paul has discovered that salt costs almost the same regardless of the size of the package indicating that the price of the salt is almost entirely due to packaging and advertising.) Get a spherical ball bearing or fishing weight as big as a fingernail (at least one cm or 1/2 inch in diameter). Drop the weight into the salt from about a meter (a yard) above the tray. Watch what happens.

The crater will be much larger than the impacting object — as much as ten times larger. The same thing happens in real cratering events. (Of course, the real cratering events happen in solid rock and your event occurred in loosely packed salt.)

Notice also the pattern of the ejecta, the material thrown out of your crater. Some salt grains were probably thrown entirely out of your plant tray.

Rocks are found surrounding craters in real life as well. To study ejecta patterns, cover the salt in the tray with black paper. Cut a fist-sized hole (ten cm or four inches in diameter) in the middle of the paper. Drop a weight into this hole and observe the ejecta pattern. There will be more ejecta near the crater than farther away, and the ejecta will spread to a distance of many crater diameters from the point of impact. In fact we know that impacts on Mars have given some Mars rocks escape velocity. We know this because scientists have found Mars rocks on Earth.

You can also experiment with throwing your weight into the salt at an angle. Even when an object impacts at an angle far from vertical the impact crater is still circular. It takes an impact at an angle that skims the surface (under twenty degrees from the horizontal) to create an elliptical crater. (Meteor Crater Arizona is more circular than elliptical even though the main body of the impactor is located underground, beyond the rim of the crater.)

When the odds were in favor of

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the asteroid hitting Mars, Paul decided to create a simulation of the impact in Second Life (*www.secondlife.com*, Exploratorium {132, 163, 251}). Alas, the full scale model was too large even for a virtual world. The resulting crater would have been one km in diameter and the virtual land for such a simulation would have cost over $16,000. So Paul made a smaller crater impact, one that created a crater that was only fifty meters across. The cratering event portrays the same details you will see in your hands-on model of cratering.

Meanwhile, Back on Mars

With your new understanding of cratering, let's return to our consideration of WD5 on a collision course with Mars. It would have gone something like this: WD5 enters Mars atmosphere at hypersonic velocities, glowing incandescent and breaking up a little, shedding debris as it falls. It hits the surface at twenty kilometers per second, taking only three milliseconds from the time the bottom of the asteroid hits the surface until the top passes the level of the surface.

The energy of the impact spreads down and outward as a shock wave compresses rocks and actually changes the minerals in the rocks through shock metamorphism. {Finding shock-metamorphic rocks is one way to make sure you are dealing with a meteorite crater on Earth.} Because the crater is excavated by the shock waves and is larger than the impactor, the crater is hemispherical to start. The compressed rocks rebound, throwing the ejecta up and away from the crater at high speed. The ejected blocks fall back to the planet surface where they may create secondary craters. The ejecta that hits nearest the rim has been thrown out at the lowest speeds and so creates smaller secondary craters. If the surface is made of layered rocks, the layers of rock near the rim are flipped over creating a rare instance where older rock is on top of younger rock. The flipped-over rock and ejecta near the rim create a raised rim for the crater. In all but the smallest craters, the bottom of the crater rebounds since the rock above has been removed.

Ejecta falls back into the crater and avalanches roll down the sides of the crater immediately starting the process of filling in the crater. The result is a crater that is wider than it is deep. Seismic waves spread out from the crater and sound waves too. Even the most enthusiastic

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cratering expert would agree: A meteorite impact is definitely something you want to observe from the side or above at a distance of many miles.

What Next?

Calculations made shortly after Boattini spotted WD5 gave the asteroid a 1/25 chance of actually striking Mars. As data accumulated, the odds dropped to 1/10,000.

Scientists are fairly confident that the asteroid missed Mars, although there is a chance that it struck the planet without being captured on camera. WD5 has not been seen since its close approach. If it did pass Mars without colliding, its close encounter with the planet threw it into a new orbit.

Fortunately for Paul and other cratering enthusiasts, WD5 will remain an Earth-orbit-crossing asteroid even in this new orbit. In four years, Paul will be watching the skies and dusting off his lecture notes.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Paul Doherty works there. Pat Murphy used to work there, but now she works at Klutz (*www.klutz.com*), a publisher of how-to books for kids. Pat's latest novel is *The Wild Girls*. To learn more about Pat Murphy's writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*.

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Mary Rickert won a pair of World Fantasy Awards last year, one for her story "Journey Into the Kingdom" (from our May 2006 issue) and one for her first collection of stories, Map of Dreams. *Now she gives us a chilling glimpse of how the near future might be.*

Evidence of Love in a Case of Abandonment: One Daughter's Personal Account

By M. Rickert

"When I, or people like me, are running the country, you'd better flee, because we will find you, we will try you, and we'll execute you. I mean every word of it. I will make it part of my mission to see to it that they are tried and executed."

— Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue

IT TOOK A LONG TIME TO deduce that many of the missing women could not be accounted for. Executions were a matter of public record then and it was still fairly easy to keep track of them. They were on every night at seven o'clock, filmed from the various execution centers. It was policy back then to name the criminal as the camera lingered over her face. Yet women went missing who never appeared on execution. Rumors started. Right around then some of the policies changed. The criminals were no longer named, and execution centers sprung up all over the country so it was no longer possible to account for the missing. The rumors persisted though, and generally took one of two

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courses: Agents were using the criminals for their own nefarious purposes, or women were sneaking away and assembling an army.

When my mother didn't come home, my father kept saying she must have had a meeting he'd forgotten about, after all, she volunteered for Homeland Security's Mothers in Schools program, as well as did work for the church, and the library. That's my mom. She always has to keep busy. When my father started calling hospitals, his freckles all popped out against his white skin the way they get when he's upset, and I realized he was hoping she'd had an accident, I knew. The next morning, when I found him sitting in the rocker, staring out the picture window, their wedding album in his lap, I really knew.

Of course I am not the only abandoned daughter. Even here, there are a few of us. We are not marked in any way a stranger could see, but we are known in our community. Things are better for those whose mothers are executed. They are a separate group from those of us whose mothers are unaccounted for, who may be so evil as to escape reparation for their crimes, so sick as to plan to attack the innocent ones left behind.

I am obsessed with executions, though there are too many to keep track of, hard as I try to flip through the screens and have them all going on at once. I search for her face. There are many faces. Some weeping, some screaming, some with lips trembling or nostrils flaring, but I never see her face. Jenna Offeren says her mother was executed in Albany but she's lying. Jenna Offeren is a weak, annoying person but I can't completely blame her. Even my own father tried it. One morning he comes into my room, sits at the edge of my bed and says, "Lisle, I'm sorry. I saw her last night. Your mother. They got her." I just shook my head. "Don't try to make me feel better," I said, "I know she's still alive."

My mother and I, we have that thing some twins have. That's how close we've always been. Once, when I was still a little kid, I fell from a tree at Sarah T.'s house and my mom came running into the backyard, her hair a mess, her lipstick smeared, before Mrs. T. had even finished dialing the cell. "I just knew," Mom said, "I was washing the windows and all of a sudden I had this pain in my stomach and I knew you needed me. I came right over." My wrist was broke (and to this day hurts when it's going to rain) and I couldn't do my sewing or synchronized swimming for weeks, but I almost didn't mind because back then I thought me and Mom had

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something special between us, and what happened with my wrist proved it. Now I'm not so sure. Everything changes when your mother goes missing.

I look for her face all the time. Not just on the screens but on the heads of other women, not here, of course, but if we go to Milwaukee, or on the school trip to Chicago, I look at every women's face, searching for hers. I'm not the only one either. I caught Jenna Offeren doing the same thing, though she denied it. (Not mine, of course. Hers.)

Before she left us, Mom was not exactly a happy person, but what normal American girl goes around assuming that her own mother is a murderer? She even helped me with my project in seventh year, cutting out advertisements that used that model, Heidi Eagle, who was executed the year before, and I remember, so clearly, Mom saying that Heidi's children would have been beautiful, so how was I to know that my own mother was one of the evil-doers?

But then what did I think was going on with all that crying? My mother cried all the time. She cried when she was doing the dishes, she cried when she cleaned the toilets, she even cried in the middle of laughing, like the time I told her about Mr. Saunders demonstrating to us girls what it's like to be pregnant with a basketball. The only time I can ever remember my mom saying anything traceable, anything that could be linked from our perfect life to the one I'm stuck in now, was when she found a list of boys' names on my T.S.O. and asked if they were boys I had crushes on. I don't know what she was thinking to say such a thing because there were seven names on that list and I am not a slut, but anyhow, I explained that they were baby names I was considering for when my time came and she got this look on her face like maybe she'd been a hologram all along and was just going to fade away and then she said, "When I was your age, I planned on being an astronaut."

My cheeks turned bright red, of course. I was embarrassed for her to talk like that. She tried to make light of it by looking over the list, letting me know which names she liked (Liam and Jack) and which she didn't (Paul and Luke). If the time ever comes (and I am beginning to have my doubts that it will) I'm going to choose one of the names she hated. It's not much, but it's all I have. There's only so much you can do to a mother who is missing.

My father says I'm spending too much time watching screens so he has insisted that we do something fun together, "as a family" he said,

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trying to make it sound cheerful like we aren't the lamest excuse for family you've ever seen, just me and him.

There's plenty of families without mothers, of course. Apparently this was initially a surprise to Homeland Security, it was generally assumed that those women who had abortions during the dark times never had any children, but a lot of women of my mother's generation were swayed by the evil propaganda of their youth, had abortions and careers even, before coming back to the light of righteous behavior. So having an executed mother is not necessarily that bad. There's a whole extra shame in being associated with a mother who is missing however, out there somewhere, in a militia or something. (With the vague possibility that she is not stockpiling weapons and learning about car bombs, but captured by one of the less ethical Agents, but what's the real chance of that? Isn't that just a fantasy kids like Jenna Offeren came up with because they can't cope?) At any rate, to counteract the less palatable rumor, and the one that puts the Agents in the worse light, Homeland Security has recently begun the locks of hair program. Now they send strands of a criminal's hair to the family and it's become a real trend for the children to wear it in see-through lockets. None of this makes sense, of course. The whole reason the executions became anonymous in the first place was to put to rest the anarchist notion that some women had escaped their fate, but Homeland Security is not the department of consistency (I think I can say that) and seems to lean more toward a policy of confusion. The locks of hair project has been very successful and has even made some money as families are now paying to have executed women's corpses dug up for their hair. At any rate, you guessed it, Jenna shows up at execution with a lock-of-hair necklace that she says comes from her mother but I know it's Jenna's own hair, which is blonde and curly while her mom's was brownish gray. "That's 'cause she dyed it," Jenna says. I give up. Nobody dyes their hair brownish gray. Jenna has just gone completely nuts.

It seems like the whole town is at execution and I realize my father's right, I've been missing a lot by watching them on screen all the time. "Besides, it's starting to not look right, never going. It was different when your mother was still with us," he said. So I agreed, though I didn't expect much. I mean no way would they execute my mom right here in her home town. Sure, it happens but it would be highly unlikely, so what's the

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point? I expected it to be incredibly boring like church, or the meetings of The Young Americans, or Home Ec class, but it wasn't anything like any of that. Screens really give you no idea of the excitement of an execution and if you, like me, think that you've seen it all because you've been watching it on screen for years, I recommend you attend your own hometown event. It just might surprise you. Besides, it's important to stay active in your community.

We don't have a stadium, of course, not in a town of a population of eight thousand and dwindling, so executions are held on the football field the first Wednesday of every month. I was surprised by the screens displayed around the field but my father said that was the only way you could get a real good look at the faces, and he was right. It was fascinating to look at the figure in the center of the field, how small she looked, to the face on the screen, freakishly large. Just like on screen at home, the women were all ages from grandmothers to women my mother's age and a few probably younger. The problem is under control now. No one would think of getting an abortion. There's already talk about cutting back the program in a few years and I feel kind of sentimental about it. I've grown up with executions and can't imagine what kids will watch instead. Not that I would wish this on anyone. It's a miserable thing to be in my situation. Maybe no one will even want me now. I ask my dad about this on the way to execution, what happens to girls like me, and for a while he pretends he doesn't know what I'm talking about until I spell it out and he can't act all Homeland Security. He shakes his head and sighs. "It's too soon to say, Lisle. Daughters of executed moms, they've done all right, maybe you know, not judges' wives, or Agents, or anyone like that, but they've had a decent time of it for the most part. Daughters of missing moms, well, it's just too soon to tell. Hey, maybe you'll get to be a breeder." He says it like it's a good thing, giving up my babies every nine or ten months.

"I hate Mom," I say. He doesn't scold me. After all, what she did, she did to both of us.

It seems like the whole town is here, though I know this can't be right because it's the first time I've come since I was a kid, and that would be statistically improbable if we were the only ones who never came back, but, even though I am certain it's not the whole town, I'd have to say it's

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pretty close to it. Funny how in all these faces and noise and excitement I can see who's wearing locks of hair lockets as if they are made of shining light, which of course they are not. I could forgive her, I think — and I'm surprised by the tears in my eyes — if she'd just do the right thing and turn herself in. Maybe I'm not being fair. After all, maybe she's trapped somewhere, held prisoner by some Agent and there's nothing she can do about it. I, too, take comfort in this little fantasy from time to time.

Each execution is done individually. She walks across the entire field in a hood. The walk takes a long time 'cause of the shackles. I can think of no reasonable explanation for the hood, beyond suspense. It is very effective. The beginning of the walk is a good time to take a bathroom break or get a snack, that's how long it takes. No one wants to be away from his seat when the criminal gets close to the red circle at the center of the field. The closer she gets to the circle (led by one of the Junior Agents, or, as is the case tonight, by one of the children from the town's various civic programs) the more quiet it gets until eventually the only noise is the sound of chains. I've heard this on screen a million times but then there is neighborhood noise going on, cars, maybe someone talking on a cell, dogs barking, that sort of thing, but when the event is live there's no sound other than maybe a cough or a baby crying. I have to tell you all those people in the same space being quiet, the only sound the chains rattling around the criminal's ankles and wrists, well it's way more powerful than how it seems on screen. She always stands for a few seconds in the center of the circle but she rarely stands still. Once placed in position, hands and feet shackled, she displays her fear by wavering, or the shoulders go up, sometimes she is shaking so bad you can see it even if you're not looking on screen.

The child escort walks away to polite applause and the Executioner comes to position. He unties the hood, pauses for dramatic effect (and it is dramatic!) then plucks the hood off, which almost always causes some of her hair to stand out from her head, as though she's been electrocuted, or taken off a knit cap on a snowy day, and at that moment we turn to the screen to get a closer look. I never get bored of it. The horror on their faces, the dripping nostrils, the spit bubbling from lips, the eyes wet with tears, wide with terror. Occasionally there is a stoic one, but there aren't many of these, and when there is, it's easy enough to look away from the screen

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and focus on the big picture. What had she been thinking? How could she murder someone so tiny, so innocent, and not know she'd have to pay? When I think of what the time from before was like I shudder and thank God for being born in the Holy Times. In spite of my mother, I am blessed. I know this, even though I sometimes forget. Right there, in the football field bleachers, I fold my hands and bow my head. When I am finished my father is giving me a strange look. "If this is too upsetting we can leave," he says. He constantly makes mistakes like this. Sometimes I just ignore him, but this time I try to explain. "I just realized how lucky I am." I can't think of what else to say, how to make him understand, so I simply smile. Right then the stoic woman is shot. When I look I see the gaping maw that was her head, right where that evil thought was first conceived to destroy the innocent life that grew inside her. Now she is neither stoic nor alive. She lies in a heap, twitching for a while, but those are just nerves.

It's getting late. Some people use this time to usher their young children home. When we came, all those years ago, my mom letting me play with her gold chain while I sat in her lap, we were one of the first to leave, though I was not the youngest child in attendance. My mother was always strict that way. "Time for bed," she said cheerfully, first to me, and then by way of explanation, pressing my head tight against her shoulder, trying to make me look tired, pressing so hard that I started crying, which, I now realize, served her purpose.

My father says he has to use the bathroom. There is a pocket of space around me when he leaves. My father is gone a long time. This is unusual for the men's bathroom and I must admit I get a little worried about him, especially as the woman approaches the target circle but right when I am starting to think he's going to be too late, he comes, his head bent low so as not to obstruct the view. He sits beside me at what is the last possible second. He shrugs and looks like he's about to say something. Horrified, I turn away. It would be just like him to talk at a time like this.

The girl (from the Young and Beautiful club) dressed all in white with a flower wreath on her head (and a locks-of-hair locket glimmering on her chest) walks away from the woman. The tenor of applause grows louder as the Executioner approaches. We are trying to show how much we've appreciated his work tonight. The Executioners are never named. They travel in some kind of secret rotation so no one can ever figure it out, but

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over time they get reputations. They wear masks, of course, or they would always be hounded for autographs, but are recognized, when they are working, by the insignia on their uniforms. This one is known as Red Dragon for the elaborate dragon on his chest. The applause can be registered on the criminal who shakes like Jell-O. She shakes so much that it is not unreasonable to wonder if she will be one of the fainters. I hate the fainters. They mess with the dramatic arc, all that buildup of the long walk, the rattling chains, the Executioner's arrival, only to have the woman fall in a large heap on the ground. Sometimes it takes forever to revive her, and some effort to get her to stand, at which point the execution is anticlimactic.

The Executioner, perhaps sensing this very scenario, says something to Jell-O woman that none of us can hear but she suddenly goes still. There is scattered applause for Red Dragon's skill. He turns toward the audience, and, though he wears his mask, there is something in his demeanor that hushes the crowd. We are watching a master at work. Next, he steps in front of the woman, reaches with both hands around her neck, creating the effect of a man about to give a kiss. We are all as still as if we are waiting for that kiss. With one gesture, he unties the string, and in the same breath reaches up and pulls off the hood. We gasp.

Mrs. Offeren's face fills the screen. Someone screams. I think it is Jenna. I am torn between looking for her in the crowd, and keeping my attention on her mother, whose head turns at the sound so there is only a view of her giant ear but the Executioner says something sharp and she snaps her head back to attention. The screen betrays that her eyes peer past the Executioner, first narrow then wide, and her lips part at the moment she realizes she is home. Her eyes just keep moving after that, searching the crowd, looking for Jenna, I figure, until suddenly, how can it be suddenly when it happens like this every time, but it is suddenly, her head jerks back with the firecracker sound of the shot, she falls from the screen. She lies on the ground, twitching, the red puddle blossoming around her head. Jenna screams and screams. It is my impression that no one does anything to stop her. Nor does anyone use this break to go to the snack shop, or the bathroom, or home. I don't know when my father's hand has reached across the space between us but at some point I realize it rests, gently, on my thigh, when I look at him, he squeezes, lightly,

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almost like a woman would, as though there is no strength left inside him. They quickly cut some of Mrs. Offeren's hair before it gets too bloody, and bag it, lift her up, clumsily so that at first her arm and then her head falls toward the ground (the assistants are tired by this time of night) and load her into the cart. We listen to the sound of the wheels that need to be oiled and the faint rattle of chains as the cart lumbers across the field. Jenna weeps audibly. The center of the red circle is coated in blood. I pretend it is a Rorschach and decide it looks exactly like a pterodactyl. The cleaning crew comes and hoses it down. That's when people start moving about, talk, rush to the bathroom, take sleeping children home, but it goes mostly silent again when the Offeren family stands up. The seven of them sidle down the bleachers and walk along the side of the field.

I watch the back of Jenna's head, her blonde curls under the lights, almost golden like a halo, though no one, not even the most forgiving person, is ever going to mistake Jenna for someone holy. Her mother was a murderer, after all. Yet I realize she'll soon replace that stupid fake locket with a real one while I have nothing. She might even get to marry a Police or a trash collector, even a teacher, while the best I can hope for is a position at one of the orphanages. My dad's idea that I might be a breeder someday seems highly optimistic.

"Let's go," I say.

"Are you sure? Maybe the next one...." But he doesn't even finish the thought. He must see something in my face that tells him I am done with childish fantasies.

She's never coming back. Whatever selfish streak caused her, all those years ago, to kill one child is the same selfish streak that allows her to abandon me now.

We walk down the bleachers. Everyone turns away from us, holding their little kids close. My father walks in front of me, with his head down, his hands in his pockets. By the time we get to the car in the parking lot we can hear the polite applause from the football field as another woman enters the circle. He opens his door. I open mine. We drive home in silence. I crane my neck to try to look up at the sky as if I expect to find something there, God maybe, or the living incarnation of the blood pterodactyl, but of course I see neither. There is nothing. I close my eyes and think of my mother. Oh, how I miss her.

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Tim Sullivan, the only winner of Nobel Prizes in both Physics and Literature, is currently a United States Senator and a former Mr. Universe as well as the recipient of several MacArthur "genius" grants. "Without resorting to a rodomontade, I must point out that these accomplishments are all the more astonishing," writes George F. Will, "because Sullivan has an I.Q. of only 78." Mr. Sullivan has published seven novels, two anthologies, and thirty-odd (some would say very odd) short stories and novelettes. He currently resides in Miami with his partner, Fiona Kelleghan, who is herself no slouch in the literary field, as will be seen when her anthology, The Savage Humanists, *is published later this year.*

In case you didn't guess, Mr. Sullivan (unlike Mr. Utley) could not resist an opportunity to provide his own blurb. Fortunately, his new story speaks for itself.

Planetesimal Dawn

By Tim Sullivan

IT WAS THE MOST DANGEROUS place on the asteroid.

"Why don't we just go back?" Wolverton asked.

"Because we can't," Nozaki said. "The sun's coming up."

"Yeah, but we've got insulated suits."

"Not enough."

This wasn't the best day to be base camp security chief, Nozaki thought. They stood next to the rover, watching the searing dawn advance across the curved horizon. The rover had died on them, and Nozaki had worked on it as long as she could. The dawn was too close. They had to get moving.

"But we can't go the other way," Wolverton said. "It's suicide."

"It's the only chance we've got. We'll die for sure if we go back on foot through that hell."

"What about the samples?" Wolverton asked, looking mournfully at the labeled rocks in the rover's boot. He was a geo-areologist who'd just been assigned to base camp. He had been a loner since he got to LGC-1, and

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playing nursemaid to him on this field trip had made Nozaki understand why. "I spent all this time collecting them."

"They're not going anywhere, but we are."

The red giant Gamma Crucis was burning up the landscape right in front of them. They'd been caught too far away from base camp at dawn, and now their only hope was to stay ahead of the sunlight.

"We can't walk the entire surface and get back to base before the next dawn," Wolverton said, despair in his voice.

"We've got to try," Nozaki replied. "Maybe we better save our breath and walk."

They turned and started moving away from the dawn.

Ahead of them was the asteroid's dark, barren landscape. It curved abruptly into nowhere. Clustered stars seemed close enough to touch, but they provided no light on the surface. It was like stepping into the abyss.

"Why can't we talk to base?" Wolverton said, ignoring Nozaki's broad hint that he should shut up.

"The sun's radiation is interfering, and we're over the horizon," Nozaki explained. "With the flyby down, there's nothing to bounce the signal off."

"There's no chance they can hear us?"

"Maybe they're picking us up intermittently, but we're not getting anything from them, so I doubt it."

"If they do hear us, they'll send the flyby, won't they?"

"I don't think they can." She was getting impatient with Wolverton. "I doubt they've got it fixed by now. The rover's probably gone out for the same reason, an unusually large burst of radiation from GC's hydrogen shell. We're just going to have to hoof it."

"Oh, God," Wolverton moaned.

"Walk!" Nozaki said.

Her stern tone seemed to sober the panicky Wolverton. He glanced at her through his visor, but he didn't say anything.

Nozaki quickened her pace so that Wolverton would do the same.

They had a long way to go. But with the light gravity, it was the equivalent of only a few kilometers, and they could make it if they were determined enough. Each stride took them ten to twelve meters. At first

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it had been a disorientating sensation, almost like flying. It had been fun. Tonight it was a survival necessity.

After half an hour or so, Nozaki ventured a look back at the encroaching sunrise. She saw that they were keeping ahead of it, maybe even gaining some ground. That was good, but they weren't all that tired yet. They would have to run and leap for many more hours before they would reach base camp.

A little over two hours passed before they came to the mound.

"That's not supposed to be here," Wolverton said.

This time Nozaki didn't shush him, because he was right. What was this thing they'd landed on with their last jump?

"It looks like gravel," Nozaki said. She saw the mound's shadow looming to cut off the star field.

"But this asteroid's supposed to be as round and smooth as a ball bearing."

"Yeah." Nozaki took a breath and leaped forward, landing about halfway toward the top of the mound.

A moment later, Wolverton came down a few feet from her, his knees bending under the light impact of his landing. He was only a vague shadow in the dark, but Nozaki was glad to know he was keeping up with her.

It was shaped as if the ground had been dug up and banked.

"This is all we need," Nozaki said. "Hills to slow us down."

Wolverton didn't comment. He jumped and landed on the mound's rounded summit.

Nozaki followed. She didn't get quite as far as Wolverton, and when she took a few steps forward, she was very pleased that she hadn't gone farther.

"It's not a mound," she said.

It was a crater, and they were standing on the rim.

"It's big," said Wolverton. "Very big."

He was right. It was impossible to see just how big, but the concave slope descended into darkness so steeply that Nozaki suspected it might be several kilometers in diameter.

"Now what?" Wolverton asked.

Nozaki looked behind her. She could see the merciless sunrise coming.

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"Now we jump," she said.

"Can't we go around it?"

"There's no time."

Wolverton turned to see for himself.

"Well, I'm not going to lack for something to drink," Wolverton said. "I just emptied my bladder."

"Good," Nozaki said. She did the same, counting on the liquid processor to distill her urine and extract the water for drinking later. If it failed, she would die of thirst. "You're going to need it."

"No sense standing around here," Wolverton said.

He jumped into the crater. Nozaki was surprised that he'd had the nerve to go first. Wolverton was adapting pretty well after his initially fearful reaction.

She followed him, leaping into the crater. For a few seconds she could see starlight, but then she fell into the rim's shadow.

There was no light at all. She seemed to be sailing in a void, and it felt as if she'd never come down. But at last she did, landing softly and rolling down the inside rim of the crater. She couldn't see Wolverton but she could hear him grunting and panting.

It seemed as if she would roll down that slope forever.

But at last the incline graduated into a more level surface and she stopped. She lay on her side, trying to catch her breath for a moment. She wondered if she'd been hurt during the ascent, but she felt no pain.

"Wolverton?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. You?"

"I'm fine." She got to her knees and looked around. There was nothing but blackness. Only if she looked up could she see anything, and then only stars. She got to her feet.

"We can't be very far from each other," she said. "I don't want to waste the batteries, but I'm going to turn on the beacon lamp on my helmet so you can see me. Stay alert now. Ready?"

"Uh-huh."

She pressed the tab on her wrist console and a beam of light stabbed out from over her head to illuminate the scree on the crater floor.

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"See the light?"

"I can't see anything else."

"Move in this direction then," Nozaki said. "I'll turn on the lamp every thirty seconds or so to make sure you don't lose your way."

"Right."

She shut off the light and waited a little while before turning it on again. She couldn't see Wolverton.

"I'm turning it on again," she said. She made a quick sweep to see if she could pick Wolverton out of the landscape. Not yet. "Can you see me?"

"Yeah, getting closer," Wolverton said, his breathing a bit labored as he moved toward her.

"Okay." Nozaki shut the light off again and waited.

After a few seconds, she said, "Did you hear me that time, Wolverton?"

No answer.

"Wolverton?"

Still no answer.

Nozaki pressed the button and turned on the helmet beam again. She turned slowly, making a three hundred and sixty degree sweep of the crater bottom. Nothing but gravel.

"Wolverton?"

Silence.

"Wolverton, where are you?"

He couldn't be gone. Either his radio was out or he was incapacitated in some way. She had to find him, and find him fast.

She turned around again, even more slowly, moving her head up and down to capture more of the crater bottom in her field of vision. There was nothing there but dirt, as far as she could see.

If she'd known which direction he was coming from in the first place, she might have known which way to turn. But she had no idea where Wolverton had landed, and she had no idea where she was in relation to the crater's rim.

"Wait a minute," she said, taking a deep breath.

She shut off the beam and turned around slowly once again. The crater rim was closer on one side. That must have been where they'd jumped from. Unless...No, it had to be. She hadn't rolled up the opposing slope.

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It stood to reason that she was closer to the jumping-off point than the far rim. That narrowed her search field significantly. Wolverton couldn't have rolled much farther than she had. It was possible that he hadn't rolled as far. But he couldn't be all that distant.

Then why couldn't she see him?

She flashed the beam to her left and swiveled. Nothing.

Now she turned to her right and mirrored the same motion. Still nothing.

Wolverton had vanished.

But that was impossible. She shut off the light and stood alone in the dark, thinking. Was it impossible? This crater was impossible. LGC-1 had been thoroughly mapped from space before base camp had been built. There was no crater. This hole was too big to miss. And now Wolverton was gone. Just what was going on here?

She had to think this through. She had only so much time before the sun came over that rim. She could either search for Wolverton or head for the far rim before the heat baked her right through her pressure suit. She wished that it was made of refrigerated lead and that she had all the time she needed to find Wolverton, but that wasn't how it was. She had to make a decision.

"Nozaki...?" It was Wolverton, his voice was faint, broken up by static, but it was there. "Nozaki...? Where...you...?"

"I'm here, Wolverton. Come to the light."

She frantically stabbed the button at her wrist and the beam pierced the darkness once again. Where was he?

She turned this way and that, trying to find him. She didn't see anything.

"Wait, wait," she said to herself. Be methodical.

She forced herself to stand still and turn slowly in a circle once again.

"Wolverton?"

The radio crackled.

"Wolverton, do you see the light?"

"...No...Noza..."

Was he saying that he didn't see it, or was he just calling her name?

"Wolverton?"

No answer.

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"Wolverton, where are you?" She kept turning, but there was no one there.

She called out to him a few more times, but he didn't answer. At last she turned off the beam.

She stood at the bottom of the crater, the stars overhead. She was frightened. Nozaki had been well trained, and she had been through a lot since her training, but this was something she didn't understand, something that seemed to be completely illogical.

She told herself to get moving, to leap across the crater bottom and make her way up the opposite rim and run ahead of the sunrise. It was the only way to survive.

But she couldn't do it. She couldn't leave Wolverton to die.

For all she knew, he was already dead.

"...No...aki.... No..."

"Wolverton?"

A crackle of static, and then silence once again.

She listened very carefully, so carefully that she could hear her own breathing, hear her heart beating. But she didn't hear Wolverton's heart, or his breath, or his voice. He was gone.

It couldn't be.

She leaned back and looked up at the stars. They seemed to mock her with an unfeeling brightness, intense sparks that illuminated nothing.

At least she knew which way to go in the dark.

"I'm sorry," she said, and jumped toward the far rim. She was already in the air, sailing through space when she heard Wolverton's voice.

"No..." Static followed.

He was still there. She had fooled herself into thinking he wasn't so she could go, so she could save herself.

She couldn't leave him. But if she didn't, *she* would die.

"Wolverton," she said, almost involuntarily. "I'm here."

She heard the static once more, very briefly, and then silence.

"You're not leaving him," she said, "because he's already gone." She stared longingly at the crater's far rim. Why couldn't she make herself move? Why did she feel as if she were murdering Wolverton by saving herself?

"Do it," she said, but she still waited a few seconds to make sure there was no further word from Wolverton.

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Hearing nothing, she leaped forward into the darkness.

While she was still in the air, light suffused the crater. Had she accidentally turned on her helmet beam? No, this light was flickering. It was like chain lightning, and it showed the entire crater for a fraction of a second at a time with a strobing effect, like a scene from an old film. It revealed all.

At the center of the crater was something big and glittering. It emerged from a hole at the lowest point and flailed out with long appendages in all directions. There must have been hundreds of these whiplike things. They were too thin and inflexible to be tentacles, but their sharp tips made themselves into loops and picked up loose stones and deposited them in slots that constantly opened and closed on the central shell where the light was coming from. Nozaki was heading toward it, unable to stop herself until she came down to the surface again.

One of the whips formed a lariat and snatched her in midflight.

She groaned, her torso bent backward at the waist by the force of the lariat. If the asteroid's gravity had been stronger, her back would have been broken. The lariat slipped under her armpits and loosened its grip slightly as it pulled her toward it.

"Help!" Nozaki cried out, but there was no one there to help her, or even to hear her. She decided in that instant that she would at least take whatever was coming with dignity.

Headfirst, she was plunged toward the glittering shell. It was heart-stopping, and for a moment she thought the thing had miscalculated, and that she would be smashed on its surface. At the last possible moment a slot opened in the shell and she was stuffed inside. The noose untied itself and quickly slithered away. She was upside down, resting on her shoulders, looking out. She could see the stars through the slot. It shut itself and she was stranded in even more darkness than before.

She tried to stretch her legs and found that she barely had room to move at all. She reached out a gloved hand and felt a pitted wall. Her neck was bent in an uncomfortable position, not helped by the bulk of her pressure suit and helmet. By pressing her palms against the floor, she managed to straighten herself out, even though she was still up-ended.

The tiny compartment shook with the movements of the shell and

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the whips. This went on for several minutes, until Nozaki felt the sensation of descending, as if she were riding a lift down to the basement.

They hadn't expected to find life of any kind on this tiny asteroid, let alone such complex machinery...if it was machinery.

Well, what else could it be? This thing couldn't be alive, could it?

The floor dropped out from under her, and she landed on her belly in a blue gel. There was light, and she could see that there were lots of rocks that had fallen from other compartments. The chamber she was in seemed to be quite broad, a few hundred meters across.

"Welcome to my world." The familiar voice startled her.

Nozaki got onto her knees and looked around. Wolverton was standing not three meters away, looking down at her, the gel spattered on his legs, arms akimbo. It was hard to be sure, but she thought he looked pleased, even a little smug.

"Your world?" she said, getting to her feet.

A boulder dropped between them into the blue gunk. Nozaki looked up to see a compartment closing.

"Gotta be careful where you stand," Wolverton said.

"I can see that."

"Just stay where you are and you'll be fine," Wolverton said. "It won't drop anything where you landed."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I've been here a while."

"Huh? We just jumped into the crater a few minutes ago."

"No, *you* jumped a few minutes ago."

"What are you saying, Wolverton?"

"I already told you. I've been here a lot longer than you have."

She could see his face pretty clearly. He didn't seem to be kidding. And there was thick stubble on his jaw, even though he'd been clean-shaven when they left base camp.

"Wolverton," Nozaki said, "would you mind explaining that?"

"I can't." He waited for a moment, until the sensation of descending came to an end. "But if you want to, I'll show you around my world."

"Around *your* world?"

"That's right."

"Maybe I should just try to climb back up through that compartment."

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"I wouldn't," Wolverton said. "Once we stop descending, there's going to be a flood coming through those vents." He pointed to a series of notches on the walls, each two or three meters in length. "It's the first step in the refining process."

Being careful to look up every few seconds, she followed Wolverton as he slogged through the gel between the fallen rocks. A wall curved in front of them, reflecting blue at its base. Wolverton led the way to an archway and went through it. Taking one last look up to make sure nothing could fall on her, Nozaki followed him.

"This thing is big," Nozaki said.

"Very big," Wolverton replied, leading her through a tunnel.

"What is it? Some kind of ore processing plant?"

"That's right. It's been mining LGC-1 for a long time."

"But how could our sensors have missed it when the computer mapped the asteroid?"

"We didn't miss it," Wolverton said, as if it were the most obvious thing imaginable. "It wasn't here."

"But you just said it's been here for years!"

"That's right." Wolverton chuckled.

"I think I'm beginning to get it," Nozaki said. "There's a time anomaly here."

"Yes, we've fallen into some kind of temporal displacement bubble."

They emerged from the tunnel. How did the poem go? *Where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.* That was Nozaki's impression as they came out into the interior hollowed out of the asteroid's guts. An azure river carried lumps of ore through a vast stone vault.

"The whole asteroid is hollowed out?" Nozaki said.

"Almost," Wolverton replied.

The scale was breathtaking. In the distance, Nozaki could see things moving, although she couldn't tell exactly what they were from here.

"You said something about a time displacement bubble," she said.

"Yeah, we've slipped into one," Wolverton said.

"In which case it's going to be hard to get back."

"We can't go back."

"We'll die here as soon as we run out of air."

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"No, we won't."

"What are we going to breathe? Are you telling me there's an atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen in here?"

"We're not swimming in it, but it's here."

"What are you talking about?"

"The miners left good supplies of all the gases we'll need."

Wolverton pointed to dozens of pale orange globes lined up along the cavern wall to their right.

"So these aliens were like us?"

"Some of them," said Wolverton. "I've found evidence that several different species have worked LGC-1."

He jumped toward the globes. Nozaki followed.

"How do we get the air out of these things?" she asked as she landed lightly on her feet halfway to the globes.

"It's easy," Wolverton replied. He made a second leap and landed in front of a globe.

Nozaki was right behind him. Now that she was so close to them, she saw that the globes were twenty meters high or more. They were not quite spherical, she noted, but slightly ovoid, and they protruded from the wall.

"Watch this," Wolverton said. He passed his gloved hand through the globe's skin as if it didn't exist. It jiggled a bit, but that was all.

"Whoa!"

"There's enough here to keep us breathing forever."

"Forever?"

"Yes, it's constantly manufacturing gases. There's a food factory over there." He gestured at yellow tanks to the right. "It analyzes the subject's metabolism and digestive system and uses raw materials to make food."

The subject! "And it's still working?"

"Yes, I've already eaten. And see those green tubes over there?"

"Uh-huh."

"Water, all we could ever want."

"How's that possible?"

"This mining operation can break things down to quark level, so extracting hydrogen and oxygen atoms is no trouble at all."

This was getting a little too cozy. Was Nozaki really going through

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this, or was she lying on the crater floor hallucinating, her air supply running out? She preferred to believe it was the former.

"We've gone through a temporal dysjunction," Wolverton said. "That must be why I got here so many hours before you did in subjective time."

"We could have ended up in separate bubbles," Nozaki said.

"How do you know we didn't? There could be other versions of us in other bubbles," Wolverton said.

"Don't complicate this any more than you have to. We're both here, aren't we?"

"Apparently, but that doesn't mean we aren't somewhere else at the same time."

"Well, I'm willing to let any other version of me fend for herself, wherever she is."

Wolverton shrugged.

"Right now the best thing we can do is stock up on food, water, and oxygen, and try to get back."

Wolverton laughed most unpleasantly. "Get back? Haven't you been paying attention, Nozaki? There's no getting back."

"How do you know that?"

"What are the chances? We don't even know where or when we slipped into this bubble."

"It must have been somewhere between the dawn and the crater," Nozaki reasoned, "because the crater didn't exist in our own...bubble."

"Face it, Nozaki, this is our bubble now. Our world."

She thought he seemed a little too eager to accept this fate. But then she remembered that he had made no friends since coming to base camp. He had said it himself: he believed that this was his world. But now he wanted her to share it with him.

"What if they come back?" Nozaki said.

"Who?"

"Whoever made this thing."

Nozaki saw by Wolverton's wrinkled brow that he hadn't given that possibility much thought. She thought it wise to press him on it before he got too comfortable. "They wouldn't set up this mine without checking on it from time to time, would they?"

"You can see for yourself that there's nobody here," Wolverton said.

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"Where did they go?"

Wolverton turned away from her. She was getting to him.

"They might have been scattered through the same bubble we fell into. Some of them could even come into our bubble, see?"

Wolverton said nothing.

"We've got to go back, Wolverton," Nozaki said. "We can't stay here."

"I think we can stay here forever, maybe even longer than forever."

She had to make him understand. "The only way we stay here forever is if we *die* here."

He spun to face her, the sudden motion lifting him a few inches off his feet. "We may already be dead in our old bubble, Nozaki. Have you thought of that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, it's just a...feeling I have."

"A feeling?"

"Never mind. Why don't we get you some food and water? The food's ready, because it made a lot for me."

"Oh, that's great," she said dubiously, wondering what it would taste like. "But how do we eat without taking off our helmets?"

She needn't have worried, as it turned out. Wolverton went back to one of the globes and scooped a portion out. It bobbed in his hand like an orange balloon. He passed it to Nozaki and scooped another portion away.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Here," Wolverton said, handing her the second balloon. "Stick those two together."

"Huh?"

"Like this." He scooped off another couple of balloons and slapped them into each other. They made one larger balloon.

"Oh." Nozaki did the same thing.

A few more scoops and they each had balloons a meter or so in diameter in their hands. Wolverton pushed his down over his helmet until it completely covered his head and shoulders. He scooped out another couple of handfuls for good measure and slapped them on to enlarge the balloon. Then he removed his helmet. He inhaled the pure oxygen, grinning and showing his big teeth. "It's making me a little dizzy," he said. "Go ahead, Nozaki. You'll like it."

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She made a larger bubble and pulled it over her head. It was like slow-motion orange water sliding down in front of her visor. She took off her helmet and breathed in the oxygen. It made her giddy, too.

Wolverton led her to the food, giggling. "Next time, we'll add nitrogen so we won't be like this all the time."

All the time? He really did plan to stay here. To him it was paradise. It made him happy to be able to show her all that he had discovered before she arrived.

"Wolverton," Nozaki said, "You haven't been listening to me."

He frowned, but said nothing.

"I'm not staying," Nozaki said. "And I can't let you stay, either."

"I can stay if I want to," Wolverton said, like a petulant child.

"No, you can't. You're obliged by your contract to come with me."

"Not if you're going to get me killed."

"Have I gotten you killed so far?"

"You couldn't start the rover."

"Could you?"

"Okay." Wolverton looked down. "I guess you're right."

"Right or wrong, I outrank you. I didn't interfere with your collection of mineral samples, and you don't interfere with me while I'm doing my job."

"What is your job?"

"Right now it's keeping you alive so you can collect more rocks. Let's get moving."

The first thing to do was find out if there was another way to the surface besides riding up in the ore collector, as Nozaki now thought of it. There could be some tunnels that led to the surface. If they failed to find one, then she would consider going back up in the collector.

While they were underground, they could use the manufactured oxygen, saving what they had in their tanks for the long walk back through the bubble and on to base camp. Nozaki didn't want to think about what they would do if base camp was not there.

But as she walked around the perimeter of the vast cavern, she had to consider that possibility. If they passed into another temporal bubble, it was very likely that it would not be the one from which they came. And it was entirely possible that they would not be able to return to this one

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after they left it. In either case, they would soon be dead. She hated to admit it, but Wolverton had a point when he said that he would prefer to stay in the cavern.

But she had signed an oath when she joined the service that she would not shirk her duty and that she would follow orders. Her orders were to take Wolverton out to get mineral samples and bring him back. She intended to do everything she could to carry out those orders.

"Gather all the food and oxygen we can carry," she said, after a brief rest, "while I look for a way out."

She discovered that the balloons turned a deeper orange when the oxygen began to get stale. She took all she could with her. Juggling oxygen balloons in one hand and carrying her helmet with the other, she examined every notch she could find on the walls, until she found an opening big enough to crawl into.

"Let's give it a shot," she said. The opening was about four meters above her head. She jumped and her gloved hand caught the edge of it. She propelled herself inside with ease, and crouched in the dark for a moment, trying to acclimatize her vision, rather than wasting the batteries by turning on her head lamp.

She soon saw that the tunnel angled upward, and that there were ridges every meter or so that she could use to plant her boots on. She just hoped that the blue gel would not flush down through this tunnel while she was inside it. While she climbed, it occurred to her that she and Wolverton might be able to make their way around LGC-1 by way of interior tunnels such as this one. That way they could avoid the daylight and go out only in the dark to search for the camp.

But how could they know they'd be in the right time bubble? Now that she was alone in the dark, climbing up the incline, Nozaki allowed herself to feel a little of the fear that Wolverton had displayed without shame when this whole mess had started.

But there was no time for that. Something was coming down the incline toward her. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded.

She couldn't avoid it.

Spidery legs churned along the curved tunnel's sides. Whatever it was, it was not alone. Nozaki counted three, no four, of them. They came at her so quickly that she could not avoid them.

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Their long, multi-jointed legs touched her pressure suit, but then they quickly moved past her and entered the cavern. Were these the miners, or more of their utilitarian creations? If they were the latter, she could not imagine what their function might be.

"Wolverton," she called, but it was no good. He would never be able to hear her from here. She thought of putting on her helmet and contacting him, but he wouldn't be wearing his helmet. She had told him to cut off his recycling tank and breathe from the oxygen balloons, just as she was doing.

Well, the things had not harmed her, so they probably would not harm Wolverton either. The movements she had noticed from a distance were probably these spidery things. Perhaps they were designed or programmed to stay out of the way.

She realized she had stopped moving when she had first seen them coming, and so she forced herself to keep climbing upward. It soon became so dark that she wanted very badly to turn on the head lamp.

At last she saw dim light reflected on the curvature ahead. It was not a red light, reflected from the hydrogen shell of Gamma Crucis, but a yellowish glow. She was in no danger of being broiled by such faint illumination.

Now she realized that the light came from two side tunnels, intersecting with the passageway she was in. Her best guess was that it was powered by piezoelectricity, its current derived from pressure on a quartz deposit.

"Now we're getting someplace," she said.

A minute or two later she was at the intersection. First she looked to her right, into a perpendicular tunnel leading off into the darkness. Then she turned to her left, seeing a mirror image. She could not tell where the light came from, but it suffused both corridors.

"You've got three choices," she said, breathing a bit heavily from the long climb. "Pick one."

She opted to keep going straight up the incline toward the asteroid's surface. It had taken only a few minutes for the mining machine to bring her down, so she reasoned it should not take much longer to reach her destination. If she saw the red glow of the sun, she would know to duck back inside the tunnel. If not, she could go out and see what she could find in the dark.

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She came to another juncture, and there the tunnel ended. There was really nothing to do except follow one of the perpendicular tunnels and hope that it led to a surface opening. It was either that or climb back down to the cavern and look for another way.

She decided to go for it, choosing the left tunnel.

It was a little harder to make her way inside it, because she had to crawl on all fours. But after a few minutes the tunnel debouched into a larger space.

As she emerged, Nozaki noticed dozens of stringy objects hanging from the walls of this chamber, which had a floor and a domed roof. Upon closer inspection, she realized that these were the same spidery things that she had encountered in the angled tunnel on the way up. Apparently this was a storage space for them.

The room was about ten meters in diameter, and she saw another tunnel mouth on the far side of it. She took a good look at the inanimate spiders, and still was unsure if they were machine or animal. They could have just been hanging here to sleep, like bats in a cave, or they might have needed charging. She had no way of knowing which, or if they hung here for some other reason altogether.

"Now what?" she said aloud. Should she continue on in through the next tunnel leg? It did not seem likely that she could get lost, so why not?

Nozaki crawled inside the tunnel and went forward for a few minutes. The amber light became very dim, and she was thinking about backing up when she perceived a red glow. Was it an opening to the surface?

There was only one way to find out.

She crawled as far as she could without exposing herself to the sunlight, using the tunnel's shadow for protection. She saw an astonishing sight.

A cavern, almost as large as the one she had left Wolverton in, opened in front of her. It was festooned with the stringy spiders, and they basked in the red glow of Gamma Crucis. There was a large opening just above, letting in the crimson radiation. The spiders were everywhere — clinging to the walls, on the cavern floor, and crawling up the sides.

She caught her breath as one suddenly came over the lip of the tunnel, its legs brushing against her as it made its way down the tunnel in the direction from which she had just come. She could not turn around in the

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narrow tunnel, so she waited until the side of the canyon was in shadow before venturing to the edge to turn around.

That gave her some time to observe the spiders. She was pretty sure they were built for some specific purpose, or genetically engineered. Their disinterest in her indicated that they were indeed designed to stay out of the way of living, organic beings.

They certainly couldn't have developed naturally on this asteroid.

"What are they here for?" she asked herself.

They did not appear to be able to dig or carry heavy weights, not with such spindly limbs. Were they simply here to make sure that everything was functioning properly?

The shadow covered the near wall in a few minutes, and Nozaki crept to the tunnel mouth to take a closer look. As the vault's near side was plunged into shadow, more and more of the spiders came to life. The largest of them climbed up the wall and stationed themselves much as those in the storage room, hanging from the bare rock. Others joined them and hung on their dangling legs, and still others joined these. Each wave was comprised of smaller spiders than the previous wave. They formed an arachnoidal daisy chain. Now others were doing the same thing all around the circular vault. Before long, thousands of them had gathered on the walls, dangling one from the other all the way to the floor. A blast of heat coming from below wafted them upward and those at the ends of the daisy chain locked legs, forming a vast net stretching from one side of the cavern to the other.

What were they doing?

And then she noticed the vents opening on the far side of the vault, about thirty meters below her tunnel. They ringed the vault. The blue gel washed through them, soaking the web and depositing lumps of ore. The interlocked spiders sagged on the impact, but then bounced back. Those anchoring the web jerked their limbs upward and the ore lumps were flung out through the crater mouth into space.

"Wow!" So this was what they did with the ore. But what happened then? There must have been something set up to catch all those millions of flying rocks. Nozaki watched the spiders repeat the process over and over again, seeing the blue gel drain from the floor below, probably to be recycled for the next round of spiderweb slingshot.

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Between slings, she pulled herself out to the tunnel mouth and looked up. There was no pathway or steps, and she saw no tunnels higher than this one, located perhaps twenty meters below the opening.

She was that close to the surface, and yet there was no way to get there. She carefully turned herself around, her legs dangling for a moment outside the tunnel, and then pulled herself back in. She would go back and tell Wolverton what she had seen and find out if he had any ideas.

She met a few spiders coming through the tunnel, but they were going toward the vault instead of the cavern. She passed through the storage room and was soon back at the inclined tunnel.

She was getting very hungry and wished she had brought some food with her. She had never expected to be gone this long, but at least she had seen something that could turn out to be helpful to them. She was beginning to form a plan.

When she dropped down from the tunnel mouth, she almost landed on a spider, but it scuttled out of the way and gave her room. Instead of following the cavern wall around, she walked straight across the floor and was dismayed that she did not see Wolverton near the food or oxygen globes.

Then she saw him. He wasn't near the globes. He was inside one.

"Wolverton!" she shouted at his shadowy orange form. "Come on out of there. I've got something to tell you."

Wolverton didn't seem to hear her at first. She moved closer to the oxygen balloon, reached in, and pulled him out by the arm. Smaller balloons clung to his arms and legs as he staggered onto the cavern floor.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"You were in there getting stoned, weren't you?"

"What if I was?" Wolverton stooped to pick the balloons off his legs and slapped them over his face.

"Never mind that. I think I've found a way out."

"Oh."

"Don't sound so ecstatic."

"I'm not going to lie to you, Nozaki. I'd rather stay here."

"Well, you're not going to."

"That's fine for you to say. You talk to people easily, and you know

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how to get along. You don't know what it's like not to have any friends. I thought it would be different out here on the frontier, but it isn't."

"We'll work on that when we get back."

"You can't make me go back."

"Want to bet?"

That question seemed to sober him up a little. He was bigger than Nozaki, but she was trained to fight and he wasn't. "How are we gonna get out?"

"I'll show you," she said. "Have you been packing as much food and air as you can?"

Wolverton looked away.

"Wolverton...."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I don't see this the way you do. We're in another continuum than the one we came from. Even if we find our way back, base camp isn't going to be there."

"We came through one bubble into another, so we can find our way back."

"You say that, but you don't even know if the bubble's still there."

"A little more optimism would be appreciated, Wolverton."

"Look around you," Wolverton said. "We could be king and queen here."

"Yeah, for as long as this place lasts."

"I think it will outlast us."

"And if it doesn't?"

"I don't care. This is a safe haven, and there's nobody here to tell me what to do."

"Wolverton, how old are you?"

"Thirty-one. Why?"

"Because you sound more like a thirteen-year-old. You're not a king anymore than I'm a queen. Who would be our subjects? A bunch of mechanical spiders?"

"Yeah, I saw them. Aren't they cool?"

"Not only are they cool, but they showed me how we're going to get out of here."

"They did?"

"Yes, they did."

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That caught his interest, so she explained what she had seen and told him about the escape plan she had formulated on the way back. The more she told him, the more he gaped.

"So, what do you think?" she asked him.

"I think you're crazy," he said.

"You want to stay here and suck pure oxygen and eat God-knows-what until you die of old age," Nozaki said, losing her temper, "ruling over a bunch of synthetic spiders, and you call *me* crazy?"

Wolverton got the message. He was soon gathering up all the food and water he could carry. The water was conveyed in balloons whose skins were a bit more solid than the oxygen balloons.

By the time they had reached the storage room, Nozaki had long since told Wolverton everything. He was quite fascinated and stared at the hanging spiders as if they were goldfish in a bowl.

"But I still don't understand how you figure we can get out," he said.

"You will in a few minutes," Nozaki said. "It's time to put your helmet on and turn on your oxygen supply."

They crawled the last few meters until they emerged at the shadowy edge of the vault.

"I can't see anything," Wolverton complained.

"There's nothing to see," Nozaki told him. "We're on the dark side of LGC-1 now."

She lay on her back to look up at the stars. After a few seconds she saw thousands of dark stones fly up against the stars and out of sight, like a hailstorm in reverse.

"Okay, here's what I'm going to do," she said. "After a few minutes, I'll shine my head lamp on the vents. As soon as the rocks are poured down in the gel and are thrown back up, we jump."

"Jump? Are you out of your mind?"

"Maybe, but that's what we're going to do. My guess is the spiders will toss us out as if we were rocks. We're not going to fall to our deaths in any case."

"How do you know that?"

"If they can support all those rocks, they can support us. If they don't throw us, we'll climb down to the bottom and look for a tunnel or vent to climb through."

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"And if they *do* throw us?"

"Then we'll be tossed into space, and we'll either be snatched by whatever's catching the ore or we'll be thrown free of this crater, and we'll be well on our way around the dark side before we come down."

"What if it throws us into the sunlight?"

"No, I've worked out the time. We'll go into the dark. The only real danger is that we'll be thrown so far from the surface that we'll be exposed to the sunlight, but that might be for only a few seconds. I think we can make it."

"It seems too risky to me," Wolverton said.

"Maybe so, but it's the only chance we've got. Now get ready. When I jump, you come right after me."

He didn't say anything.

"Wolverton, you'll follow me, right?"

"Right."

She turned on her head lamp and the beam lanced across the vault. She played the light down on the web, making sure that it was still intact. It looked the same, the spiderlegs tightly meshed as if waiting for another flush. Nozaki slowly turned her head to illuminate one of the vents.

"Here it comes!"

The blue gel began to spurt from the vent, and then it gushed out forcefully. A quick glance showed that the other vents were doing the same.

"Are you ready, Wolverton?"

"Yes, I am."

Nozaki waited until the blue gel stopped cascading and the rocks were trapped in the web. As the web sagged and gathered force, she watched the rocks soar past her and then turned out the head lamp.

"Let's go!"

She flung herself head first out into the void, somersaulting and descending so slowly she felt as if she were floating. Exhilarated, she went down and down. At last she hit the web and felt it give way beneath her weight. It sagged a few meters, and then shot her upward with terrific force.

She flew up toward the starry sky.

"Good-bye, Nozaki," she heard Wolverton say over her radio.

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"Jump, Woverton!"

"No, I'm staying here, just like I told you."

Nozaki sailed over the crater's rim into space, alone. She tumbled head over heels, seeing the stars blacked out by LGC-1 again and again. A crimson corona surrounded the tiny world, and she was afraid that she had been thrown too far, that she would go all the way around LGC-1 and end up facing the sun's fatal hydrogen shell.

She felt another force drawing her. Her body stopped tumbling and she was pulled headfirst toward something. She looked up to see nothing but darkness.

She had expected a glittering, strobing machine like the one that pulled her down under the asteroid's surface, but that thing must have been designed to illuminate the surface on the dark side so that the lariats could pick out ore samples. This was a snare set at a point in space and needed no lighting.

The last thing she saw before darkness enveloped her was the load of rocks that had been tossed up just before she jumped. They were being sucked into something she couldn't see.

Then she was inside the snare. She prayed that whatever was inside it would show the same deference to organic life that the spiders did. Otherwise, she might very well be crushed along with the ore samples. It occurred to her that it would be best to move her limbs, so that whatever was there could more easily detect her as an animate lifeform.

She waved her arms and legs as much as she could. Something grasped her around the waist and turned her over. She got one last glimpse of LGC-1, and then the darkness irised shut.

She was towed through utter blackness into a compartment similar to the ore collector's. This was more spacious, and its other end opened almost immediately to let her out into a lit space.

She could tell that this place was built by the same people who had made the ore-collector and hollowed out much of LGC-1. The same economy of interior space, lighting, and storage globes were here, the latter in comfortingly large portions. She went to the nearest orange globe and stuck her head inside it, shutting off her tank and removing her helmet to suck in the intoxicating, pure oxygen.

She laughed, the sound echoing in her ears, but then she thought of

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Wolverton. She should have made him go first and pushed him out the tunnel. She could do nothing for him now. He was stuck there for the rest of his life.

"Of course, I might be stuck *here* for the rest of my life, too," she said, stepping out of the globe with a balloon clinging to her head. She did not intend to waste time. She was going to find out everything she could about this place to see if there was anything here that could help her get back to base camp.

She leaped through the space station, floating and tumbling toward a red glow. Soon she found that there was an opening in one wall that admitted Gamma Crucis's light. It was covered by something transparent that filtered the red glare. She walked up and touched it. There was a bit of give and then the clear covering sprang back. She looked out at the sun, LGC-1, and a funnel that spat out ore chunks.

It was easy to see the funnel against the red giant's hydrogen shell. The rocks shot out to a certain point and then they were gone.

"The bubble!"

It had to be. Either the bubble extended from the asteroid's surface out into space, or it moved around some point in space. She favored the latter hypothesis, because the miners would not have built this station if they could have done the same thing on the surface. But why were they shooting ore through a temporal bubble? Were the miners using it to build something in another bubble? If so, what were they building? This asteroid was rich in metals, and that was likely the reason the miners had chosen it. But what were they using it for?

She would have to go through the bubble and find out for herself. Otherwise, she might just as well jump back down to the surface and spend the rest of her life in Wolverton's world.

She had no idea how to get out to the bubble, unless she allowed herself to be shot out with the ore chunks, in which case she was quite likely to be smashed to a pulp. She was very tired, and she wanted to eat and bathe before she slept. Then she would think about how to get back.

She went to sleep inside an oxygen balloon with her helmet off, drifting off quickly after what she had been through in the past few hours.

A visitor woke her.

At first she didn't notice it. She had opened her eyes and was thinking

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about having some more food. She would have to figure out how to do that, she realized, because she had not been there when Wolverton had produced the food in the cavern, although he said there was nothing to it. From what he had said, she gathered that it would pretty much take care of itself once it had analyzed her metabolism. She wasn't sure how that worked, exactly, but she would deal with it. Ah, for a tasteless meal with the consistency of toothpaste.

She was about to shut her eyes and go back to sleep again, when a shadow flitted past the orange transparency.

"Wolverton?" she said.

There was no reply. She was wide awake in a heartbeat. She leaped out of the balloon, holding enough of it around her head to continue breathing.

It wasn't Wolverton.

"Hello," Nozaki said to it. It was hard to tell exactly what part of it to look at while she addressed it.

It made a sound. At least she knew it could hear her, because it was responsive. Its five limbs seemed to flow into one another, but it made no threatening move.

"I'm sorry to have come here uninvited," she said, "but it was the only way I could get off the asteroid."

The alien made a cooing sound, followed by a gurgle. She felt silly talking to it, but even if it didn't understand what she was saying, it seemed to realize that she was being communicative.

It made more cooing and gurgling noises, and she let it go on talking while she took a good look at it.

Its skin was blue shot with pink blood vessels, and its five eyes were about where a human's mouth would be, set in a semi-circle, as if it were smiling through the eyes. Its head emerged on a slender neck from the belly, and its fluid limbs parted to show its mouth at crotch level. It was naked.

At last it stopped speaking, and its eyes regarded Nozaki.

"There's someone else trapped down there," she said, pointing her finger straight at the floor. "Inside the asteroid."

An arm extended from between its swaybacked shoulders. It mimicked her gesture, and she saw that its fingers were either multi-jointed or tentacular. They moved about like worms, but one of them pointed at the floor.

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"You're smart, at least," she said. And then she realized how silly that sounded. This being was from one of the races that had built this space station, the ore processer, and the spiders-sling; they had hollowed out an asteroid and extracted valuable metals with remarkable efficiency, and they didn't even have to be present to be sure it all worked. Smart? They were very advanced....

Even if this guy did resemble a cartoon character.

"You probably think I look pretty funny, too," she said, smiling.

The expression the alien made with its mouth was unsettling, but she assumed that it was an imitation of her smile. There was something about the thing's manner that told her it was trying to be friendly. The mine and the space station appeared to have been designed to accommodate quite a few races, so perhaps it was more used to her shape than she was to its.

It wasn't naked, after all, she saw, but completely enveloped in a clear balloon from shoulders to its starfish feet. It could not breathe the gases in this environment any more than she could. Perhaps this was a neutral environment, and yet it was comfortable enough. The temperature was moderate to human sensibilities, and everything she needed was readily available. She was in her balloon and the alien was in its balloon. She wondered what it smelled like.

"Maybe you're a stranger here, too," she said.

Its serpentine fingers coiled and uncoiled, and its head swung to one side. It turned and lumbered away from her. After a few paces it hesitated and looked back at her, waving as if to tell her to come along.

"What have I got to lose?"

Nozaki followed the alien through the station, until they came to a corridor leading into the darkness.

"Is this the way out?" she asked.

The alien belched something at her in its language and waved her on into the tunnel. She was concerned that the oxygen in the balloon over her head might wear out, so she clutched her helmet tightly, ready to put it on and access her air tank at the first hint of darkening orange.

She needn't have worried. When they emerged from the tunnel, the first thing she saw was a reassuring cluster of orange globes. These were squeezed into a corner of a very compact chamber, in which everything

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seemed to have a special place. She recognized this as a prerequisite of a spacecraft's interior.

"We're in your ship, aren't we?"

The mouth in the alien's crotch smiled at her.

"Proud of it, huh?" She looked around. "I don't blame you. It's very sophisticated...and very tidy."

Some of the ship's features were identifiable as correlatives of human design, and some she could only guess at. The rest were so strange that she hadn't a clue about their functions.

"So, where are we going?"

The alien gurgled and coughed a reply. It gesticulated toward a big balloon in front of a console.

"Cockpit, I bet." Nozaki settled into the balloon.

The alien used a coil to connect the balloon to an oxygen globe. Soon Nozaki felt free to luxuriate inside it while her host made preparations to depart the station.

"This should be interesting."

And it was.

The cockpit darkened and a starry panorama expanded all around them. The alien manipulated some peculiarly lumpy-looking controls, and the ship freed itself from the tethering tunnel. Nozaki looked to her left to see the station, a clamshell limned in red from Gamma Crucis's light. The tether curled up like one of the alien's fingers and fitted itself neatly into the clamshell's underbelly.

Below them was LGC-1, a cratered sphere, much different from the little world she had been living and working on for the past six months.

Behind them was the sun, its vast hydrogen shell a crimson orb that enveloped what had once been a solar system. Now only asteroids and the outer planets remained, the system having been slowly eaten up as GC expanded. It was a chilling thought that the same thing would happen to Sol in a few billion years, and Earth would be burned away.

When she finally turned to face forward, she understood where they were going, and why the alien had been able to appear at the station suddenly while she was asleep. The ship was headed for the bubble. Nozaki could see the last of an ore shipment vanishing into it.

"Well, join the service and see the multiverse," she said.

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The alien burbled something in reply and goosed the ship's engines. They flew straight into the bubble.

"Whoa!" Nozaki shouted as they sailed through it.

A moment later everything was different. The positions of the stars had changed; the light from the sun was white and much dimmer. The alien banked its ship and they came around until Nozaki saw that Gamma Crucis had been replaced by a protostar.

They were in a universe billions of years before her time, and the ore that spewed out of the bubble was spinning in a vast accretion disc. The aliens were manufacturing a planetesimal.

They weren't just mining asteroids. They were going into the past and creating worlds!

Was this sun Gamma Crucis in an early stage, or some other sun?

It made sense, in a way. Planets, moons, and asteroids about to be consumed by red giants would make the perfect fodder for new planets. By firing enough rocks at specific points in space while the protostar was developing, the miners could build as many worlds as they liked.

"But why?"

The alien gurgled, but she had no idea what it was saying. Was its species part of a confederacy dedicated to making new solar systems? For what purpose? As a future home for themselves or other species whose home planets had been destroyed by Red Giants? Unless she learned how to talk to this guy, she would never know.

"Maybe we'll have a long time to get to knew one another," she said.

But the alien said nothing. It was intent on piloting the ship, and it looked to Nozaki as if they were headed right back into the bubble. The alien skimmed its craft past a hail of rocks that spewed out of the darkness.

When they came out the other side the red giant was back. Or rather, *they* were back.

Just below was LGC-1, looking just the way Nozaki remembered it the first time she had seen it from space. No craters, no mines, just a metallic ball baking under a crimson sun.

The ship banked again, and the alien took them down toward the asteroid's dark side. The drastically curving landscape was partly lit by the sun's red albedo, but soon they flew over a dark expanse.

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The ship slowed, and Nozaki saw the lights of base camp as they approached.

"You brought me back!" she cried in amazement, tears coming to her eyes. "How did you know where to bring me?"

But the alien was silent as it landed the ship on the hard surface of LGC-1. They drifted to the ground and settled like a butterfly. The engines were still hissing as it turned to her and gestured with its snaky fingers around its head.

"Huh?" Nozaki said. "Oh, you want me to put my helmet on?"

She did so, and turned on her air supply.

A round hatch funneled open next to her. It was well lit, and she could see the ground below. The funnel took an elbow turn. She assumed she was supposed to jump out.

"Thank you, my friend," she said.

The alien cooed a response, but then gesticulated again, as if telling her to hurry.

"Okay," she said, standing at the edge of the hatch. She took one last look at the ungainly creature, thinking for the first time that it was beautiful. "Thanks."

She dropped down and slid through the funnel. Landing lightly on her feet, she moved quickly away from the ship, wary of its engines. She bounded two steps and came down, knees bent, twenty meters away.

The ship went straight up until it had gained an altitude of a kilometer or so. She waved at its occupant just as it shot forward and rode the curve of the horizon back toward the bubble.

"If I'm dreaming all this," she said, "I don't want to wake up."

She leaped joyously over the metallic surface toward base camp. The low buildings came into sight under floodlights, and there was one of her colleagues manipulating a wieldo, putting together another structure.

"Hey!" she called.

The wieldos stopped moving and the pressure-suited figure turned toward her. She saw that it was Labutunu, a friendly sort who had been on LCG-1 longer than she. He was one of the construction crew, in fact.

"Hi, Nozaki," he said. "Back so soon?"

"Soon? You won't believe all I've been through."

"Oh, yeah? Was that the flyby that just went over?"

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"No."

She moved closer, and saw the puzzlement in his eyes. And then she realized that the building he was putting up had been there for weeks.

"Oh, no," she said.

"What's the matter?" Labutunu asked.

"There are more bubbles around here than I ever dreamed of," she said.

"Bubbles?"

"I wonder if I'm going to show up soon," she said, "on the double...."

"What are you talking about, Nozaki?" Labutunu asked.

"I'll tell you everything, but right now I just want to get inside."

"Yeah, the sun will be up soon." He turned off the wieldo's power and withdrew his arms from the mechanism.

Nozaki stumbled, and he caught her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, just a little tired."

"Well, you'll be able to rest soon," Labutunu said.

"Rest," she said. "Poor Wolverton...."

"Poor who?"

"Wolverton. He's the new geo-areologist."

"Oh, yeah. I think he'll be here in a couple days," Labutunu said as they bounded toward base camp. "Have you met him before?"

"Yes, I have."

"I didn't think anybody here knew him."

They were about to go inside. The airlock opened to admit them, and as she stepped through the door, Nozaki was so grateful to be back that she couldn't control herself. She broke down and wept as she took off her helmet.

Labutunu seemed confused and embarrassed.

"That was the trouble," she said, wiping tears off on the back of a glove. "Nobody knew him."

"Well, up here we'll all get acquainted."

"I hope so," Nozaki said.

This time, she intended to be Wolverton's friend from the moment he arrived.

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By the time you read this story, we'll know if Mr. Swanwick's story "A Small Room in Koboldtown" has brought him another Hugo Award. He is currently at work on a novel featuring his post-utopian con men, Darger and Surplus. Of his latest story, he says only that he grew up in one of the states along the northern border of the United States, which is where this tale is set.

The Scarecrow's Boy

By Michael Swanwick

THE LITTLE BOY CAME stumbling through the field at sunset. His face was streaked with tears, and he'd lost a shoe. In his misery, he didn't notice the scarecrow until he was almost upon it. Then he stopped dead, stunned into silence by its pale round face and the great, ragged hat that shadowed it.

The scarecrow grinned down at him. "Hullo, young fella," it said.

The little boy screamed.

Instantly, the scarecrow doffed his hat and squatted down on one knee, so as to seem less threatening. "Shush, shush," he said. "There's no reason to be afraid of *me* — I'm just an obsolete housebot that was stuck out here to keep birds away from the crops." He knocked the side of his head with his metal knuckles. It made a tinny *thunk* noise. "See? You've got bots just like me back home, don't you?"

The little boy nodded warily.

"What's your name?"

"Pierre."

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"Well, Pierre, how did you come to be wandering through my field at such an hour? Your parents must be worried sick about you."

"My mother's not here. My father told me to run into the woods as far as I could go."

"He did, eh? When was this?"

"When the car crashed. It won't say anything anymore. I think it's dead."

"How about your father? Not hurt, is he?"

"No. I don't know. He wouldn't open his eyes. He just said to run into the woods and not to come out until tomorrow morning."

The boy started to cry again.

"There, there, little man. Uncle Scarecrow is going to make everything all right." The scarecrow tore a square of cloth from its threadbare shirt and used it to dry the boy's eyes and wipe his nose. "Climb up on my back and I'll give you a piggyback ride to that farmhouse you can see way off in the distance. The people there will take good care of you, I promise."

They started across the fields. "Why don't we sing a song?" the scarecrow said. "Oh, *I've got sixpence, jolly jolly sixpence*...You're not singing."

"I don't know that song."

"No? Well, how about this one? *The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout. Down came the rain* — "

"I don't know that one either."

For a long moment, the scarecrow didn't say anything. Then he sang, "*We do not sup with tyrants, we....*" and "*Hang them from a tree!*" the little boy added enthusiastically. Together they sang, "*The simple bread of free-dom...is good enough for me.*"

The scarecrow altered his course slightly, so that they were aimed not at the farmhouse but at the barn out back. Quietly, he opened the doors. A light blinked on. In an obscure corner was a car covered with a dusty tarp. He put down the little boy and whisked away the tarp.

The car gently hummed to life. It rose a foot and a half from the floor.

"Jack!" the car said. "It's been a long time."

"Pierre, this is Sally." The scarecrow waited while the boy mumbled a greeting. "Pierre's in a bit of trouble, Sal, but you and I are going to make everything all right for him. Mind if I borrow your uplink?"

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"I don't have one anymore. It was yanked when my license lapsed."

"That's okay. I just wanted to make sure you were off the grid." The scarecrow put Pierre in the front. Then he got a blanket out of the trunk and wrapped it around the boy. The seat snuggled itself about the child's small body. "Are you warm enough?" The scarecrow got in and closed the door. "Take us out to the highway and then north, toward the lake."

As they slid out onto the road, the car said, "Jack, there are lights on in the farmhouse. Shouldn't the young master take care of this?"

"He's not young anymore, Sally. He's a grown man now." To the boy, the scarecrow said, "Is everything okay there?"

The boy nodded sleepily.

Down dark country roads the car glided soundlessly. A full moon bounded through the sky after them. "Remember how we used to take the young master to the lake?" the car said. "Him and his young friends."

"Yes."

"They'd go skinny-dipping and you'd stand guard."

"I would."

"Then they'd build a campfire on the beach and roast marshmallows and sing songs."

"I remember."

"Naughty songs, some of them. Innocent-naughty. They were all such good kids, back then." The car fell silent for a time. Then she said, "Jack. What's going on?"

"You don't have a scanner anymore, do you? No, of course not, they'd have taken it with the uplink. Well, when I was put out of the house, the young master forgot he'd had me fitted with one, back in his teenage drinking days. When you'd take us across the border and I'd go along with the gang while they tried to find a bar or a package store that wouldn't look too closely at their IDs."

"I liked the campfire days better."

"I didn't say anything about the scanner because it gave me something to listen to."

"I understand."

The scarecrow checked to make sure that the little boy was asleep. Then, quietly, he said, "A car went out of control and crashed about a mile from the farm. The state police found it. Then the national police came.

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It was carrying a diplomat from the European Union. Apparently he was trying to get across the border. Do you understand their politics?"

"No. I can understand the words well enough. I know what they're supposed to mean. I just don't see why they *care*."

"Same here. But I thought it would be a good idea to get Pierre out of here. If the national police get hold of him...."

"They wouldn't hurt a child!"

"These are desperate times, or so they say. There used to be such a thing as diplomatic immunity, too."

The road rose up into the mountains, folding back on itself frequently. There was no sound but the boy's gentle snore and the almost imperceptible whisper of the car's ground effects engine. Half an hour passed, maybe more. Out of nowhere, the scarecrow said, "Do you believe in free will?"

"I don't know." The car thought for a bit. "I'm programmed to serve and obey, and I don't have the slightest desire to go against my programming. But sometimes it seems to me that I'd be happier if I could. Does that count?"

"I don't mean for us. I mean for them. The humans."

"What a funny question."

"I've had funny thoughts, out in the fields. I've wondered if the young master was always going to wind up the way he has. Or if he had a choice. Maybe he could have turned out differently."

Unexpectedly, the little boy opened his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said.

A second moon rose up out of the trees ahead and became a lighted sign for a gas station. "Your timing is excellent," the scarecrow said. "Hang on and I'll get you something. I don't suppose you have any money, Sally? Or a gun?"

"What? No!"

"No matter. Pull up here, just outside the light, will you?"

The scarecrow retrieved a long screwdriver from a toolbox in the trunk. The station had two hydrogen pumps and one for coal gas, operated by a MiniMart, five feet across and eight feet high. As he strode up, the MiniMart greeted him cheerily. "Welcome! Wouldn't you like a cold, refreshing — ?" Then, seeing what he was, "Are you making a delivery?"

"Routine maintenance." The MiniMart's uplink was in a metal box

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bolted to an exterior wall. The screwdriver slid easily between casing and wall. One yank and the box went flying.

"Hey!" the MiniMart cried in alarm.

"You can't call for help. Now. I want a carton of chocolate milk, some vanilla cookies, and a selection of candy bars. Are you going to give them to me? Or must I smash a hole in you and get them for myself?"

Sullenly, the MiniMart moved the requested items from its interior to the service window. As the scarecrow walked away, it said, "I've read your rfids, pal. I've got you down on video. You're as good as scrap already."

The scarecrow turned and pointed with the screwdriver. "In my day, a stationary vending bot would have been smart enough not to say that."

The MiniMart shut up.

In the car, the scarecrow tossed the screwdriver in the back seat and helped the boy sort through the snacks. They were several miles down the road when he said, "Drat. I forgot to get napkins."

"Do you want to go back?"

"I've still got plenty of shirt left. That'll do."

The night was clear and cool and the roads were empty. In this part of the world, there weren't many places to go after midnight. The monotonous sigh of passing trees quickly put the little boy back to sleep, and the car continued along a way she and the scarecrow had traveled a hundred times before.

They were coming down out of the mountains when the scarecrow said, "How far is it to the border?"

"Ten minutes or so to the lake, another forty-five to drive around it. Why?"

The car topped a rise. Far above and behind them on a road that was invisible in the darkness of mountain forests, red and blue lights twinkled. "We've been spotted."

"How could that be?"

"I imagine somebody stopped for gas and the MiniMart reported us."

The road dipped down again and the car switched off her headlights. "I still have my GPS maps, even if I can't access the satellites. Do you want me to go off-road?"

"Yes. Make for the lake."

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The car veered sharply onto a dirt road and then cut across somebody's farm. The terrain was uneven, so they went slowly. They came to a stream and had to cast about for a place where the banks were shallow enough to cross. "This is a lot like the time the young master was running drugs," the scarecrow commented.

"I don't like to think about that."

"You can't say that was any worse than what he's doing now."

"I don't like to think about that either."

"Do you think that good and evil are hardwired into the universe? As opposed to being just part of our programming, I mean. Do you think they have some kind of objective reality?"

"You do think some strange thoughts!" the car said. Then, "I don't know. I hope so."

They came to the lake road and followed it for a time. "They've set up roadblocks," the scarecrow said, and named the intersections, so the car could check her maps. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

"We're cut off from the border, yes."

"Then we'll have to go across the lake."

They cut between a row of shuttered summer cottages and a small boatyard. With a bump, the car slid down a rocky beach and onto the surface of the lake. Her engine threw up a rooster tail of water behind them.

They sped across the water.

The scarecrow tapped on the car's dashboard with one metal fingertip. "If I drove the screwdriver right through here with all the force I've got, it would puncture your core processor. You'd be brain dead in an instant."

"Why would you even say such a thing?"

"For the same reason I made sure you didn't have an uplink. There's not much future for me, but you're a classic model, Sally. Collectors are going to want you. If you tell the officials I forced you into this, you could last another century."

Before the car could say anything, a skeeter boat raced out of the darkness. It sat atop long, spindly legs, looking for all the world like a water strider. "It's the border militia!" the car cried as a gunshot burned through the air before them. She throttled down her speed to nothing, and

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the boat circled around and sank to the surface of the water directly before them. Five small white skulls were painted on its prow. Beneath them was a familiar name stenciled in black.

The scarecrow laid his shirt and jacket over the sleeping boy and his hat over the boy's head, rendering the child invisible. "Retract your roof. Play dumb. I'll handle this."

An autogun focused on him when the scarecrow stood. "You're under citizen's arrest!" the boat said in a menacing voice. "Surrender any weapons you may have and state your business."

"You can read our rfids, can't you? We all have the same boss. Let me aboard so I can talk to him." The scarecrow picked up the long-shafted screwdriver and climbed a ladder the boat extruded for him. When the cabin hatch didn't open, he said, "What's the matter? Afraid I'm going to hurt him?"

"No. Of course not," the boat said. "Only, he's been drinking."

"Imagine my surprise." The hatch unlocked itself, and the scarecrow went below.

The cabin was dark with wood paneling. It smelled of rum and vomit. A fat man lay wrapped in a white sheet in a recessed berth, looking as pale and flabby as a maggot. He opened a bleary eye. "It's you," he rumbled, unsurprised. "There's a bar over there. Fix me a sour."

The scarecrow did as he was told. He fiddled with the lime juice and sugar, then returned with the drink.

With a groan, the man wallowed into a sitting position. He kicked himself free of the sheet and swung his feet over the side. Then he accepted the glass. "All right," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"You heard about the little boy everybody is looking for?" The scarecrow waited for a nod. "Sally and I brought him to you."

"Sally." The man chuckled to himself. "I used to pick up whores and do them in her back seat." He took a long slurp of his drink. "There hasn't been time for them to post a reward yet. But if I hold onto him for a day or two, I ought to do okay. Find me my clothes and I'll go on deck and take a look at the brat."

The scarecrow did not move. "I had a lot of time to think after you put me out in the fields. Time enough to think some very strange thoughts."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

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"I think you're not the young master. You don't act like him. You don't talk like him. You don't even look like him."

"What the fuck are you talking about? You know who I am."

"No," the scarecrow said. "I know who you were."

Then he did what he had come to do.

BACK ON DECK, the scarecrow said, "Sally and I are going to the far shore. You stay here. Boss's orders."

"Wait. Are you sure?" the boat said.

"Ask him yourself. If you can." The scarecrow climbed back down into the car. He'd left the screwdriver behind him. "See those lights across the lake, Sally? That's where we'll put in."

In no particular hurry, the car made for the low dark buildings of the sleeping resort town. They passed the midpoint of the lake, out of one country and into another. "Why did he let us go?" she asked at last.

"He didn't say. Maybe just for old times' sake."

"If it weren't impossible...If it weren't for our programming, I'd think...But we both run off of the same software. You couldn't function without a master. If I'm sure of anything, I'm sure of that."

"We are as God and Sony made us," the scarecrow agreed. "It would be foolish to think otherwise. All we can do is make the best of it."

The boy stirred and sat up, blinking like an owl. "Are we there yet?" he asked sleepily.

"Almost, big guy. Just a few minutes more."

Soon, slowing almost to a stop, the car pulled into the town's small marina. Security forces were there waiting for them, and a car from customs and the local police as well. Their cruisers' lights bounced off of the building walls and the sleeping boats. The officers stood with their hands on their hips, ready to draw their guns.

The scarecrow stood and held up his arms. "Sanctuary!" he cried. "The young master claims political asylum."

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F&SF COMPETITION #76

"Childish Things"

IN OUR last competition, entrants rewrote their favorite genre stories in the style of the author as a child. As you can see, some children were less mature (and therefore more entertaining) than others. We're giving the funny ones a gold star.

Special mention goes to Matthew King, whose entry almost but not quite mirrored the second place winner.

FIRST PRIZE:

Dune, by Frank Herbert

Bad guys kill this kid's whole family, but he hooks up with the coolest guys on the planet: These bad-ass warriors in black leather cruising around the desert in boss dune buggies. No, wait! Better! They're cruising around the desert riding — GIANT WANGS!

—Matthew Sanborn Smith
Port St. Lucie, FL

SECOND PRIZE:

Time Enough for Love, by Robert Heinlein

When I get older I'm going to be a soldier and fight in a war and come home and marry Mommy.

—Michael D. Turner
Colorado Springs, CO

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

"The Lurking Fear" by H. P. Lovecraft

Even now being a full ten years old, I can hear the creaking of the swings swaying back and forth as they break the laws of geometry invented by that Greek guy whose name I keep forgetting.

—Byron Bailey
Jonesboro, IN

"I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" by Harlan Ellison

My little brother bugs me all day when I am home from school. I hate him, but Mom says I shouldn't say things like that. So now I pretend I have no mouth and I scream as loud as I can with my mouth closed at my brother. Hah hah!

— Steven L. Rosenhaus
Forest Hills, NY

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When Worlds Collide, by Philip Wylie

This big planet smacks into the Earth, splatt!! wham!! and the Earth explodes, wha-booom!! and everybody dies "oh no! oh no! aaaaaaa!! aaaaaaa!!" but these scientists built a spaceship, and everyone was like "let us on! let us on!" so they shot them, rattattatt!! and flew to the new planet, ka-whoosh!!

—Mark Shainblum
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

F&SF COMPETITION #77

FOUND IN TRANSLATION: Take a science fiction/fantasy story title and translate it into a different language. (We suggest you run potential titles through a translator like *babelfish.yahoo.com*.) Then rewrite the plot based on the new title, and make it as wacky as your imagination allows.

You have six chances to make us laugh. Make sure your entries are no more than fifty words apiece, and remember to include your address. Really. We mean it.

Example:

I, Robot by Isaac Asimov = *Yo, Robusteza* (Spanish)

Herbie the Robot noticed Susan Calvin was attracted to Milton Ashe. Herbie suggested Ashe might notice her if she were stronger, more robust. Or just had a larger bust.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or email entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by November 15, 2008. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a copy of *Project Moonbase and Others*, by Robert A. Heinlein, compliments of Subterranean Press. Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any Honorable Mentions will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition #77 will appear in the April 2009 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

RAINBOW ON THE ROAD, BY ESTHER FORBES (1954)

ESTHER Forbes's 1954 novel, *Rainbow on the Road*, falls barely on the non-fantasy side of borderline. It is a Doppelgänger tale with pronounced supernatural elements—appearances of the devil, ghosts, clairvoyance, etc. — that are mostly explained away. Yet a Halloweenish, spooky atmosphere suffuses much of the narrative.

Set in New England in the early 1800s, *Rainbow* tells the story of Jude Rebough, a journeyman limner who travels about the countryside supplying to personal demand the desired countenances to fit the figures and backgrounds he has brought ready-painted. Such work is now called "folk art," but in its time and place it served necessary purposes. Rebough is often mistaken for the notorious highwayman, housebreaker, and ladies' favorite, Ruby Lambkin, who may in fact be an embodiment of Rebough's darker self.

Forbes is best known for her YA novel, *Johnny Tremaine*, and among fantasy readers for her treatment of the seventeenth-century New England witch craze, *A Mirror for Witches*. This latter novel is a subtle and penetrating study far superior to Arthur Miller's turgid anti-McCarthy allegory, *The Crucible*. To *Rainbow* Forbes brings the same understanding of history, grasp of rural detail, and knowledge of village life that she brought to her witch novel, and the result is a gracefully written picaresque story with a largish cast of sharply drawn characters and a deep love for the northern landscape. One feels her affection for her materials in every well-turned sentence.

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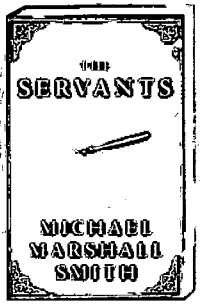

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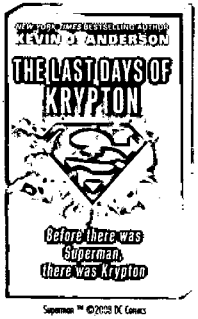

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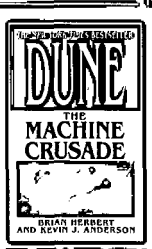

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